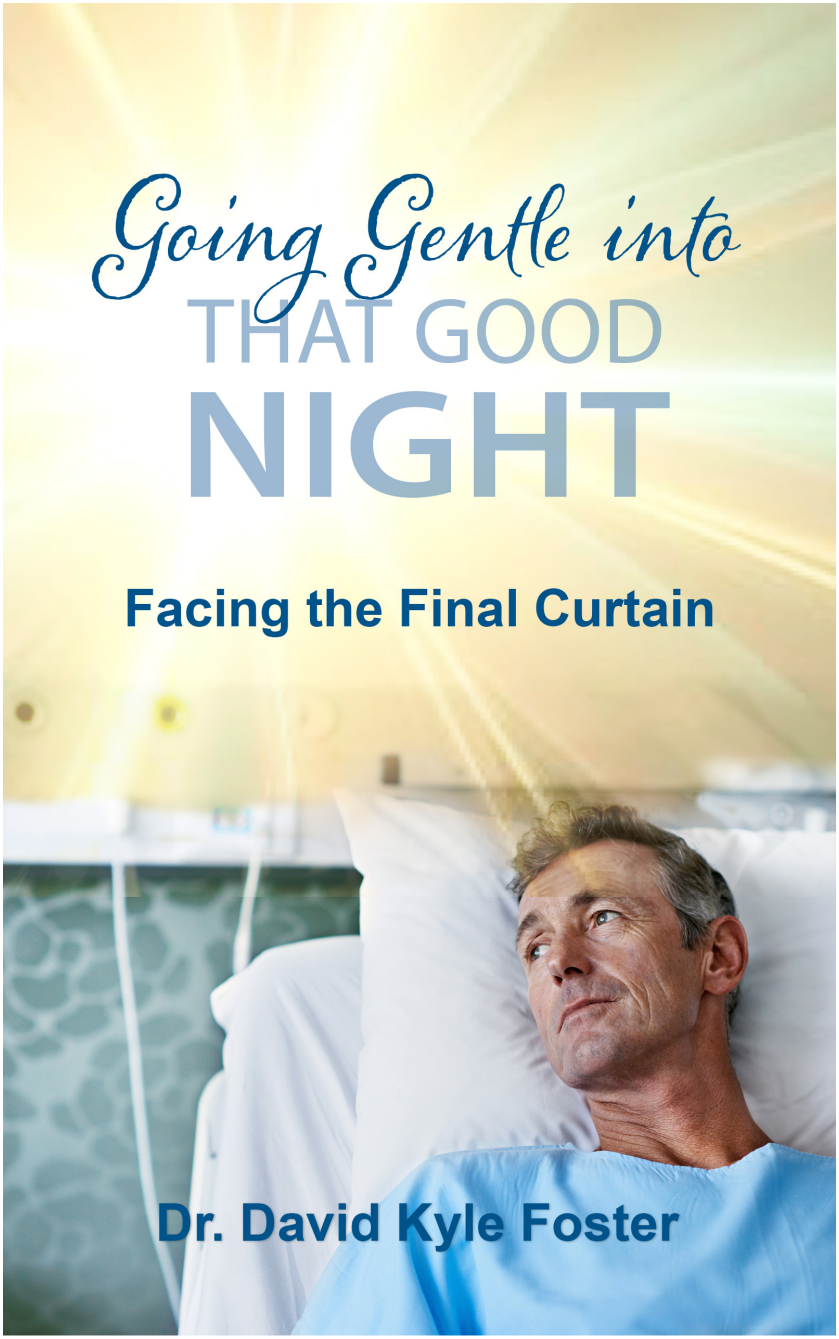
Going Gentle into THAT GOOD NIGHT

Facing the Final Curtain



Dr. David Kyle Foster

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Facing the Final Curtain

by Dr David Kyle Foster

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Introduction

Several years ago I was caught totally and unexpectedly off-guard when I suddenly found myself looking death in the face. I had been a believer in God and ministering in His Name for over 40 years and been rescued – I believe divinely – from death many times. But this was different.

I was rushed into a sextuple bypass operation that was best described as perilous. Certainly it is considered one of the most delicate and difficult to perform. When I later read the surgery notes I was astounded to find I was still alive! I realized God had stepped in again to rescue me.

Suddenly, *everything* was changing – and radically. From the perspective of "going to heaven" it was wonderful. But it was also "the end of my chance to do God's will on earth" and that was intensely sobering. It was like being "hit upside the head", as they say. Change has always been hard for me but this was change on steroids. It brought me face to face with the fact that the final judgment of my life was at hand and that any chance to alter it was over!

For a long time I had confidently asserted that, for the Christian, death was only a door into an eternal future with God. I still believed it. But to my utter surprise, I also experienced a full-on assault by hidden fears and doubts, misgivings and unbelief.

I was thrust into an extensive examination of what I truly believed. The deep recesses of my heart became exposed and I found that I was *not* "going gentle into that good night".

Almost everyone – including believers – struggles with death when the time comes. It's much easier to profess belief in our future life with God when you are well. It's different when you've been given a prognosis of months, weeks, or "I'm comin' home, Mama!"

We were never meant to die. That's why death is so hard for us. Death is Satan's domain and he is totally in character when he approaches at that moment to jeer at us, lie to us, and attempt to terrify us, and tear away faith and hope and love of God.

It is a severe test, but also a severe mercy, because for the Christian his assault has already failed, no matter what he tries to tell us. The death and resurrection of Christ is Satan's worst and total defeat. There Life defeated Death. We are held fast in the arms of God the Father even as Satan rails against God and lies to us, though it might not feel like that at the time. It shakes us, but it strengthens us. It's a spiteful attack from God's avowed enemy because he knows he's just about to lose us to God – like a nasty storm unleashed upon passengers at the end of a voyage when the harbor is in sight and the ship is absolutely unsinkable.

This book comes out of "my extensive examination of what I truly believed." The experience strengthened me and helped me know how to believe again, how to love the Lover of my soul with faith and believe His promises – even in the face of these snarling "hounds of hell". I hope it will do the same for you.

"Famous Last Words"

These "last words" of believers and unbelievers at death are electrifying in their contrast.

Believers:

Joseph Everett:
"GLORY! GLORY! GLORY!" He continued exclaiming "GLORY!" for over twenty-five minutes.

Puritan Theologian, Richard Baxter:
"I have pain—but I have peace, I have peace."

Evangelist, Henry Ward Beecher:
"Now comes the mystery!"

Missionary, David Brainerd:
"I am going into eternity; and it is sweet to me to think of eternity; the endlessness of it makes it sweet. But oh! What shall I say of the future of the wicked! The thought is too dreadful!"

Missionary, Adoniram Judson:
"I go with the gladness of a boy bounding away from school. I feel so strong in Christ."

Missionary, Lady Glenorchy:
"If this is dying, it is the pleasantest thing imaginable."

Philanthropist, William Wilberforce:
"My affections are so much in heaven that I can leave you all without a regret; yet I do not love you less, but God more."

Jesus Christ:
"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

Unbelievers:

Cardinal, Cesare Borgia:
"When I lived, I provided for everything but death; now I must die, and I am unprepared to die."

Disciple, Judas Iscariot:
"… I have betrayed innocent blood."

Philosopher, Thomas Hobbs:
"I am about to take my last voyage, a great leap in the dark."

Writer, Eugene O'Neill:
"I knew it. I knew it. Born in a hotel room–and God d-mn it–died in a hotel room."

Writer, O'Henry:

"Turn up the lights, I don't want to go home in the dark."

Mexican revolutionary, Pancho Villa:
"Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something."

Statesman, Winston Churchill:
"I'm bored with it all. I am convinced that there is no hope."

Actor, Humphrey Bogart:
"I should never have switched from Scotch to Martinis."

Actor, Errol Flynn:
"I've had a hell of a lot of fun and I've enjoyed every minute of it."

Revolutionary, Karl Marx:
"Go on, get out–last words are for fools who haven't said enough."

Queen of England, Elizabeth I:
"All my possessions for a moment of time."

King of England, Henry VIII:
"All is lost. Monks, monks, monks!"

Writer, Victor Hugo:
"I see black light."

Actress, Tallulah Bankhead:
"Codeine ... bourbon."

Actress, Joan Crawford:
"Damn it ... Don't you dare ask God to help me"

Movie Studio Head, Louis B. Mayer:
"Nothing matters. Nothing matters."

Presidential Assassin, John Wilkes Booth:
"Useless... useless..."

Writer, Thomas Payne:
"Stay with me, for God's sake; I cannot bear to be left alone. O Lord, help me! O God, what have I done to suffer so much? What will become of me hereafter? I would give worlds if I had them, that *The Age of Reason* had never been published. 0 Lord, help me! Christ, help me! No, don't leave; stay with me! Send even a child to stay with me; for I am on the edge of hell here alone. If ever the Devil had an agent, I have been that one."

Chancellor of England, Sir Thomas Scott:
"Until this moment I thought there was neither a God nor a hell. Now I know and feel that there are both, and I am doomed to perdition by the just judgment of the Almighty."

Atheist, Voltaire:
"I have swallowed nothing but smoke. I have intoxicated myself with the incense

that turned my head. I am abandoned by God and man. I will give you half of what I am worth if you will give me six months of life. I shall die and go to hell!"

Atheist philosopher, David Hume:
"I am in flames!"

French Emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte:
"What an abyss between my deep misery and the eternal kingdom of Christ!"

French King, Charles IX:
"Asleep or awake, I see the mangled forms of the Huguenots passing before me. They drop with blood. They point at their open wounds. Oh! That I had spared at least the little infants at the bosom! What blood! I know not where I am. How will all this end? What shall I do? I am lost forever! I know it. Oh, I have done wrong."

Satanist, Anton Levey:
"Oh my, oh my, what have I done, there is something very wrong ... there is something very wrong."

1 | Comprehending the Incomprehensible

At the moment of his death, the evangelist Dwight L. Moody was heard exclaiming,

Is this dying? Why this is bliss. … Earth is receding; Heaven is opening; God is calling. I must go!

Is that what we can really expect? Or were they just the ravings of a man so afraid of death that he concocted a blissful eternal future for himself.

One popular Roman saying on ancient tombstones was *Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo, or I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care.*

Though they usually deny it, most people are secretly afraid of death, especially when they are diagnosed with terminal cancer or start having chest pains. Until then, however, they avoid thinking about it, as if that will make it go away.

What about atheism? Is there a reasonable case for it? Oxford professor John Lennox warns us of choosing atheism as our belief system, saying, "atheism is a fairy story for people afraid of the light."

Indeed, the atheist claims that there is no God. But how can he possibly know that? Such a claim in and of itself requires the atheist to possess all knowledge, which he clearly doesn't. And if he did, he would be the very God that he denies.

Science, too, can never disprove the existence of God. It would have to be omniscient in order to do so – thus, the need for faith as the means to see Him revealed (Jeremiah 29:11-14; Ephesians 1: 17-23). As it says in Hebrews 11:6,

> *Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who approaches Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.*

Faith is a kind of reversal of the curse that Adam and Eve brought on the world when they believed the serpent rather than God (Genesis 3:1-5). Thus the curse can only be reversed by believing every word that comes from the mouth of God – by having faith in Jesus' claim to be the only way to the Father and the only means by which we can enter heaven (Matthew 4:3-4; Galatians 3:12-29; Acts 4:12; John 6:44, 65; 14:6).

Agnosticism is the more honest position – those who do not know if God exists. But even they are in denial of what is real, for God says in His Word (Romans 1:18-23),

> *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness. For what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from His workmanship, so that men are without excuse.*
>
> *For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking and darkened in their foolish hearts. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the*

immortal God for images of mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

In his book, *The Case for Heaven*, journalist Lee Strobel tells this story:

Harvard neurosurgeon and agnostic Eben Alexander believed we are just our brains, nothing more. Then came November 10, 2008, when a rare brain infection crashed his entire neocortex, the part of the brain that makes us human. "During my coma my brain wasn't working improperly—it wasn't working at all," he would say later. While his brain wasn't functioning, he still found himself fully conscious, but now in a "brilliant, vibrant, ecstatic, stunning" new world—a place fueled by an exhilarating sense of unconditional love.

There he encountered the face of a beautiful girl who gazed at him with an enigmatic smile. He had no idea who she was, but she radiated a beautiful love toward him.

Miraculously, the physician emerged fully healed from his near-death experience. He had been adopted as a baby, and after reconnecting with his birth family, he was sent a photograph—it was a picture of a sister named Betsy whom he had never known anything about and who had died years earlier.

The photo floored him. This was the girl with the mysterious smile who had exuded such love to him in the world beyond.

"My experience showed me that the death of the body and the brain are not the end of consciousness, that human experience continues beyond the grave," he now declares. "More important, it continues under the gaze of a God who loves and cares about each one of us."

Many people I've interviewed try to describe the astonishing beauty they've seen in heaven – scenery that takes your breath away–a fragrance so gentle and sweet. Colors like nothing on earth. One person said, "The colors seemed to be alive." But then they say, "Yes, it was amazing, but I didn't even care about it because I couldn't take my eyes off Jesus. He's beyond beautiful. He's everything I've ever longed for.

Then there's this amazing testimony taken from *The Epoch Times* magazine by a former atheist who had an out-of-body experience with his dying two-year-old son Griffin that changed his life forever:

Right there, at that moment, I was GONE – like lifted out of my body gone. I was traveling with Griffin. He was ahead of me, and he was looking back at me. He had his right hand behind him, and my left hand was holding his hand. We were traveling. It felt fast, but it wasn't the wind. I could only see blue, and there was communication happening with me. I would get lots of information from what seemed like the atmosphere.

My initial response to Griffin was, "I can't believe this is happening," and he would look at me and his smile was just so large and he was so alive. But, when he would

look away from me, I would become very ill – similar to the state I was in when I felt I wasn't tough enough to comfort him. Then, he would look at me again, and that feeling would go away. It was just so intense … the love I felt, and then he would look away.

The third time he looked away, I was so sick and nauseated by my own feelings of not being enough, and I thought to myself, "You've got to toughen up. This is a rare moment you are getting with your son. He is alive!" This time, Griffin looked at me, and he laughed. He knew my thoughts, and he knew them deeply. He chuckled and said, "Daddy, you aren't sick!." I knew all of what he meant at that moment, spiritually and emotionally. I was NOT sick!

And then … I experienced the love of God. He was everywhere. He was the blue I saw, and totally encompassed me. I could see the things I had done in my life, the things I thought were good decisions but they weren't. I could see business decisions that I made that were so wrong, because the perspective with which I made them had been selfish. I was supposed to be my brothers' keeper. I didn't take care of people like I should have. I felt God say that He'd put people in my life to take care of them, but I hadn't. I could see these things play out and God showing me in a very peaceful and loving way, not a critical way. It was harsh, but so loving at the same time. Everything made sense.

I could see eternity, and see it precisely. It was to be outside of time. It was very clear to me there that Griffin, in his two years, did more than most men in one hundred years could conceivably do. His life was truly precious and accomplished.

We got to what seemed like the end, and it seemed Griffin was trying to introduce me to someone. His attention went somewhere and then he looked back at me. And then, he asked me, "Daddy, may I stay?" It was a yes or no question. I knew that I could say no, and that he would have been alive when I got back. It was crystal clear. But you know what I said? I said "Wow, son, of course, you can stay!"

That love, that I felt there in heaven … It was clear that the most I could ever do with all the love I could ever muster up, was a tenth of one percent of the love that I experienced that God had for me.

Needless to say, Griffin's father said goodbye to atheism and "Yes" to Jesus Christ and eternal life.

2 | The Fear of Death

Except for those who are alive at the return of Jesus Christ, we will all die, so it's important to make certain that our transition to the next life will be to heaven rather than hell.

Lee Strobel, again, in *The Case for Heaven:*

> *Hovering over the hazy border between life and death, the afterlife is no longer a mere academic topic to be researched, analyzed, and debated. Heaven and hell, our existence beyond the grave, become desperately relevant. They're all that matter. … Just wait until it happens to you! Because it will. One way or another, next week or in decades, you're going to creep up to the dividing line between now and forever. When you slip from this world, what will you find? A void of nonexistence? – A dark realm of regret and recrimination? – Or a reality that's more vivid, more exhilarating, more rewarding, more real than anything you've ever known? At that moment, in the midst of that existential transition, nothing will be more important. And if it will matter so much then, isn't it worth investigating now?*

Angry at the specter of death, the poet Dylan Thomas once wrote this sad poem:

> *Do not go gentle into that good night. Old age should burn and rave at close of day; rage, rage against the dying of the light. Though wise men at their end know dark is right, because their words had forked no lightning, they do not go gentle into that good night …*

Even 4000 years ago, in the oldest known piece of fiction, *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* we find this lament:

> *How can I rest, how can I be at peace? Despair is in my heart … I am afraid of death.*

In his book, *Immortal: How the Fear of Death Drives Us and What We Can Do About It*, author Clay Jones writes,

> *Unless you are at peace with God and have a robust view of a glorious eternity awaiting you, then you're going to fear death …*
>
> *Death horrifies us because God has put eternity in our hearts. Christians understand that it is rational to want to live: humans have souls, and the Lord has imbued these souls with a sense of eternity. As Solomon puts it in Ecclesiastes 3:11, "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end." …*
>
> *Duane A. Garrett, in the* New American Commentary *writes that Ecclesiastes examines "the vain attempts to gain genuine personal worth through wealth and pleasure, through accomplishments and power, and through knowledge. The Teacher*

tells his readers how to live in the world as it really is instead of living in a world of false hope. … Ecclesiastes urges its readers to recognize that they are mortal. They must abandon all illusions of self-importance, face death and life squarely, and accept with fear and trembling their dependence on God."

Death humiliates us and frightens us, and hopefully, prayerfully, it forces many to give up their secular salvation strategies and turn to Him who gives eternal life.

The writer of Hebrews 2:15 tells us,

Freedom only comes through Jesus, who will "deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."

Jones continues:

After surviving cancer, actress Julia Louis-Dreyfus was asked if the keen awareness of the dearness of life lasted? She replied, "No. It comes and goes. But once you've walked through a life-threatening illness, there's this little nagging thing with you all the time. That fear doesn't completely go away because you've been face to face with it. But you know what?" asked Louis-Dreyfus, "We walk through our lives so oblivious to the fact that our lives are going to end. We really don't consider that. Ever. Almost ever. Maybe that's a good thing. But it's a cold, hard fact, and it is a strange thing to reconcile." That's right. Most people go through their lives trying hard not to think about it!

Even in the Church the thought of death is so uncomfortable that we only give it a fleeting glance. We distract ourselves with rituals rather than entering into the deep contemplation of life that beckons us in such times. As Jones has noted:

Nothing is more often employed to compensate for the fear of death than denial and distraction.

As believers, we have God's guarantee of a positive outcome when we die. Thus, it's not so much *that* we die, but *how* we die that should concern us.

According to C.S. Lewis,

We are not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be.

Clay Jones writes:

I know the thought of death frightens people. In fact, although many won't admit it, death frightens everyone unless they have a robust view of the glorious eternal life that is available in Jesus … I see death as a graduation. An upgrade. As Paul puts it in Philippians 1:21, "To die is gain."

Hebrews 2:14-15 tells us Jesus died for us so "that by His death He might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who

all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

Since Scripture is plain about this, we should then expect that nonbelievers would devise strategies and philosophical systems to attempt to free themselves from their fear of death.… Non-Christians aren't just sinful; they're desperate—desperate to escape their impending demise.

Psychology professors Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski write that if humans had an "ongoing awareness of their vulnerability and mortality," they would be "twitching blobs of biological protoplasm completely perfused with anxiety and unable to effectively respond to the demands of their immediate surroundings."

In 1969, Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote the groundbreaking, now famous book, On Death and Dying. *She explains what she calls "the five stages of death and dying": denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She says that if they live long enough, all terminally ill patients will sooner or later experience each of these stages of grief, ultimately accepting that one day they will die.*

It interested me to learn that people came to acceptance about their deaths. I thought that meant the terminally ill became okay with their dying. I concluded this because Kübler-Ross writes that the terminally ill "will reach a stage during which he is neither depressed nor angry about his fate." But she explains that "acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage. It is almost void of feelings."

If you ask people if they fear their own deaths, most will say no. I've concluded that these people are somewhat honest because most people don't think about their deaths. In fact, they don't think about their deaths at all. Of course, they will acknowledge in the abstract that one day they will die, but then they go happily back to not thinking about their deaths. But when they find a lump, have a chest pain, or receive a positive result on a blood test, their fear of death towers in front of them and won't leave the room.

Social scientists increasingly conclude that the fear of death drives all human behavior. In 1973, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker published his seminal and Pulitzer Prize–winning book, The Denial of Death. *In it, Becker writes that "the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else: it is the mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man."*

"You. Are. Not. Safe." Do not think you are too important to die at any time. You're not! Our hope needs to be in the eternal life available through Jesus. …

In the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, the average life span was about 45 years. Now people are expected to live up to 78.5 years. That has spurred an unwarranted optimism, when in truth, the overwhelming majority of the increase is the result of a decrease in infant mortality.

Another thing that confuses people is thinking that if we could cure cancer, most of us would live many more years. Not true. In fact, Harvard demographer Nathan Keyfitz calculated that if researchers cured all forms of cancer, people would live only a measly 2.265 years longer before they died of something else! Unless science cures the majority of all diseases, as Stephen Cave writes, "Then the result is not a utopia of strong-bodied demigods but a plethora of care homes and hospitals filled with the depressed, the diseased and the incontinent old." In that case, adds Cave, "it is not so much about living longer but dying slower."

Upon being diagnosed with incurable liver cancer, English evangelist, Canon David Watson, had this to say about it on a January 1983 British talk show …

I found myself shocked by my reaction to the diagnosis of terminal cancer! After all, if heaven is really going to be heaven, then why was I threatened by death? I had to get from being theoretically willing to be in heaven, but really wanting to be on earth, to actually wanting to be in heaven.

I had to check up on: How far did I know God's love; How far did I really love God? How far was I absolutely sure about a future life after death, which I was sure about? I had to go back to the very foundation of my faith because if I was facing death, how real is it?

I'm not really afraid of death because I really believe it opens the door to welcome the children home, and that's what I think it is. But I'm often afraid of the process of dying. The worse thing is the actual waiting for it. But I've since gotten to the place of absolute peace.

I'm absolutely safe in God's hands. I know the reality of God. I know that He will see me through death. It is just the open door. I know that whatever happens, the best is yet to be.

Basically, we can know the love and peace of God here and now, but we're still caught in a world full of suffering and pain and sadness. But I know that heaven is going to have none of those negatives there. So whatever happens, the best is yet to be …

At midnight, I would ask myself very basic questions – that if I am shortly on my way to heaven, how real is heaven, and is there really a God? How sure am I about these things? I've preached them, but I was staggered that I was going right the way back to square one about my basic beliefs.

I had agonies of mind as to what was actually going to happen in the future. But I came back to the fact of Christ, the fact of His resurrection, of which I was really very convinced.

I have been buoyed up by the sense of God's love … If I didn't believe in God, I

wonder how I could have coped with this problem.

Many fear the judgment and punishment of an imagined, angry God. They fortify their case with a veneer of contrition and by it prepare to make their defense.

In Leo Tolstoy's book, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, the protagonist cries out in his pain,

> *There is something wrong! "Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done," it suddenly occurred to him. "But how could that be, when I did everything properly?" he replied, and immediately dismissed from his mind this, the sole solution of all the riddles of life and death, as something quite impossible.*

Most of us are afraid of the unknown. For Christians, we say that we believe in a glorious new life in Christ, yet doubts can linger, leaving an opportunity for fear to take over. We proudly declare what we have learned from the Scriptures on an intellectual level, but when that moment (or the threat of it) arrives, it can be another story altogether.

It's not that we doubt the witness of the Bible, but when that moment of reckoning comes and we are about to pierce that final veil, it is so profound, so momentous, that hidden fears often rise to the surface.

On the other hand, unbelievers often ignore preparation for that final curtain by plastering over the idea with syrupy platitudes and foolish arguments that are designed to sidestep the necessary surrender to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Jeff Bezos among other moguls has invested in a "longevity" company in a quest for eternal life. For those who do not know God and therefore have no assurance of heaven, this is the next most logical thing to do. But it is futile. God has said that the assigned number of man's days is seventy to eighty (Psalm 90:10) but that they will soon be gone. To the waiting crowds, Jesus Himself asked, "Who by being anxious can add a single hour to his lifespan?" (Matthew 6:27)

In Tolstoy's book, we read the thoughts and actions of a man who is ruminating on the impending death of his friend Ivan. The denial is rife:

> *Peter Ivanovich thought: "Three days of frightful suffering and then death! Why, that might suddenly, at any time, happen to me," he thought, and for a moment felt terrified. But – he did not himself know how – the customary reflection at once occurred to him that this had happened to Ivan Ilych and not to him, and that it should not and could not happen to him, and that to think that it could would be yielding to depression which he ought not to do, as Schwartz's expression plainly showed. After which reflection Peter Ivanovich felt reassured, and began to ask with interest about the details of Ivan Ilych's death, as though death was an accident natural to Ivan Ilych but certainly not to himself. After many details of the really dreadful physical sufferings Ivan Ilych had endured (which details he learnt only from the effect those sufferings had produced on Praskoyva Fedorovna's nerves) the widow apparently found it necessary to get to business.*

The avoidance of salvation through Jesus in his ruminations was the very thing that

Jesus warned about …

> *I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am He you will die in your sins. (John 8:24)*

In his book, *Pensees*, French philosopher, theologian and physicist Blaise Pascal noted that human beings *wager with their lives* that God either exists or does not. He argued that a rational person should live as though God exists and seek to believe in Him. If God does not exist, such a person will have only a finite loss (some pleasures, luxury, etc.), whereas if God does exist, he stands to receive infinite gains (as represented by eternity in Heaven) and avoid infinite losses (an eternity in Hell). This observation has come to be known as "Pascal's Wager". Pascal alleged to those who refuse to believe in God …

> *If I'm wrong I have lost nothing;*
>
> *If you're wrong, you have lost everything.*

In his book, *As I Lay Dying*, the late Richard John Neuhaus shared many profound things about that moment when his life began to draw to an end:

> *In each of our lives, the work of dying is already underway. The work of dying well is, in largest part, the work of living well. … The mortality rate holds steady at 100 percent.*
>
> *… Every manifestation of life is specific and particular because it is bounded by the alternative to life, which is death. Death is the clock ever advancing, even if in the far recesses of our consciousness, reminding us that we are creatures of time – that we are timed … in death is abandonment in the company of the One who on the Cross was abandoned.*
>
> *... Death brings life to a point. Every going to sleep is a little death, a rehearsal for the real thing … However, it is death in the singular (when it happens to you), that turns the problem of death into the catastrophe of death.*
>
> *...The intensity of life is increased by the awareness of its awful brevity, and nowhere is it harder than at the edge of its extinction. The positive becomes accented, even revealed, by the negative.*
>
> *… Death with dignity is a delusion. Death is always the final indignity. Helplessness, loss of control, complete dependence on others, and imminent devastation can be borne with a measure of grace within a sacred space shared by those with whom the life now coming to an end was most importantly lived.....*
>
> *… Death is a private thing. It cannot be shared, it should not be shared with those who do not know the inner rooms of the life whose doors are now closing … It is not the same thing when you are alone dying or with another who is dying, and all around you an indifferent world goes on with its business, as though this never-to-be-again moment is not happening.*

…This life is now coming to an end; this life, a life never lived before and never to be lived again. This person lying there on the bed so hopelessly helpless, who, it seems not all that long ago, was held in her mother's arms so hopefully helpless; who was dandled on her uncle's lap as the family happily remarked on her resemblance to her grandmother; who was terrified of her first day of school, exultant when asked to the prom, so proud of her first job, so grateful when her son Jimmy recovered after the doctors said he had a month at most, and so handsomely matriarchal in the light blue dress that was remade for the fortieth wedding anniversary. It is this life never lived before and never to be lived again that is now coming to an end …This is the brute fact, however: There is an ending, and the sadness of it dare not be denied. For even Jesus wept at the profundity of it to a fallen race (John 11:35).

… It seems unfair that the times and places to which we have given so much of ourselves should know us no more. Our little story is one of unrequited love for a world that moves on. Most unfair, however, is that the people whom we loved should know us no more.

… Life is taken seriously when life is held to account, our lives and the lives of others. The worst thing is not the sorrow or the loss or the heartbreak. It is to be encountered by death and not to be changed by the encounter.

… George Santayana wrote: "A good way of testing the caliber of a philosophy is to ask what it thinks of death. … Frederick Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury said to his son when he complained that there was not enough time to get everything done: "You have all the time there is."

… The most important things about life and everyday living we cannot know for sure …We order our loves and loyalties, we invest our years with meaning and our death with hope, not knowing for sure, beyond all reasonable doubt, whether we might not have gotten it wrong …If each life is unique, and it is, then it would seem to follow that each death is unique.

… Per poet and playwright E. E. Cummings, we are wherelings, whenlings, daughters of ifbut, and children of almost. Living always contingently, hoping for things that would make life begin – and then life is over, and it never began.

To return to Tolstoy's exposition of the thoughts and actions of a man who is heading toward a painful death:

... life was there and now it is going, going and I cannot stop it. Yes. Why deceive myself? Isn't it obvious to everyone but me that I'm dying, and that it's only a question of weeks, days … it may happen this moment. There was light and now there is darkness. I was here and now I'm going there! Where?" A chill came over him, his breathing ceased, and he felt only the throbbing of his heart. "When I am not, what will there be? There will be nothing. Then where shall I be when I am no more? Can this be dying? No, I don't want to!"

…"What's the use? It makes no difference," he said to himself, staring with wide-open eyes into the darkness. "Death. Yes, death. And none of them knows or wishes to know it, and they have no pity for me … but they will die too! Fools! I first, and they later, but it will be the same for them.

… Ivan Ilych saw that he was dying, and he was in continual despair. In the depth of his heart he knew he was dying, but not only was he not accustomed to the thought, he simply did not and could not grasp it.

… He had been little Vanya, with a mamma and a papa, with Mitya and Volodya, with the toys, a coachman and a nurse, afterwards with Katenka and with all the joys, griefs, and delights of childhood, boyhood, and youth. It cannot be that I ought to die. That would be too terrible." Such was his feeling.

"It can't be. It's impossible! But here it is. How is this? How is one to understand it?" He could not understand it, and tried to drive this false, incorrect, morbid thought away and to replace it by other proper and healthy thoughts. But that thought, and not the thought only but the reality itself, seemed to come and confront him.

… And what was worst of all was that it drew his attention to itself not in order to make him take some action but only that he should look at "It", look it straight in the face: look at it and without doing anything, suffer inexpressibly … It can't be true! It can't, but it is." He would go to his study, lie down, and again be alone with "It": face to face with "It". And nothing could be done except to look at "It" and shudder.

… What tormented Ivan Ilych most was the deception, the lie, which for some reason they all accepted, that he was not dying but was simply ill, and that he only need keep quiet and undergo a treatment and then something very good would result. He however knew that do what they would, nothing would come of it, only still more agonizing suffering and death. This deception tortured him – their not wishing to admit what they all knew and what he knew, but wanting to lie to him concerning his terrible condition, and wishing and forcing him to participate in that lie. Those lies – lies enacted over him on the eve of his death and destined to degrade this awful, solemn act to the level of their visitings, their curtains, their sturgeon for dinner – were a terrible agony for Ivan Ilych. And strangely enough, many times when they were going through their antics over him he had been within a hairbreadth of calling out to them: "Stop lying! You know and I know that I am dying. Then at least stop lying about it!" But he had never had the spirit to do it. The awful, terrible act of his dying was, he could see, reduced by those about him to the level of a casual, unpleasant, and almost indecorous incident (as if someone entered a drawing room defusing an unpleasant odor) and this was done by that very decorum which he had served all his life long. He saw that no one felt for him, because no one even wished to grasp his position. Only Gerasim recognized it and pitied him.

… Apart from this lying, or because of it, what most tormented Ivan Ilych was that

no one pitied him as he wished to be pitied. At certain moments after prolonged suffering he wished most of all (though he would have been ashamed to confess it) for someone to pity him as a sick child is pitied. He longed to be petted and comforted. He knew he was an important functionary, that he had a beard turning grey, and that therefore what he longed for was impossible, but still he longed for it... This falsity around him and within him did more than anything else to poison his last days.

… Whether it was morning or evening, Friday or Sunday, made no difference, it was all just the same: the gnawing, unmitigated, agonizing pain, never ceasing for an instant, the consciousness of life inexorably waning but not yet extinguished, the approach of that ever dreaded and hateful Death which was the only reality, and always the same falsity. What were days, weeks, hours, in such a case?

… He … restrained himself no longer but wept like a child. He wept on account of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of man, the cruelty of God, and the absence of God.

...."Why hast Thou done all this? Why hast Thou brought me here? Why, why dost Thou torment me so terribly?" He did not expect an answer and yet wept because there was no answer and could be none. The pain again grew more acute, but he did not stir and did not call. He said to himself: "Go on! Strike me! But what is it for? What have I done to Thee? What is it for?" Then he grew quiet and not only ceased weeping but even held his breath and became all attention. It was as though he were listening not to an audible voice but to the voice of his soul, to the current of thoughts arising within him. "What is it you want?" was the first clear conception capable of expression in words that he heard. "What do you want? What do you want?" he repeated to himself. "What do I want? To live and not to suffer," he answered. And again he listened with such concentrated attention that even his pain did not distract him. "To live? How?" asked his inner voice. "Why, to live as I used to – well and pleasantly." "As you lived before, well and pleasantly?" the voice repeated. And in imagination he began to recall the best moments of his pleasant life. But strange to say none of those best moments of his pleasant life now seemed at all what they had then seemed – none of them except the first recollections of childhood. There, in childhood, there had been something really pleasant with which it would be possible to live if it could return. But the child who had experienced that happiness existed no longer, it was like a reminiscence of somebody else. As soon as the period began which had produced the present Ivan Ilych, all that had then seemed joys now melted before his sight and turned into something trivial and often nasty.

…And now it is all done and there is only death. "Then what does it mean? Why? It can't be that life is so senseless and horrible. But if it really has been so horrible and senseless, why must I die and die in agony?"

… He suffered ever the same unceasing agonies and in his loneliness pondered always

on the same insoluble question: "What is this? Can it be that it is Death?" And the inner voice answered: "Yes, it is Death."

… Ivan Ilych's life had been divided between two contrary and alternating moods: now it was despair and the expectation of this uncomprehended and terrible death, and now hope… Pictures of his past rose before him one after another. They always began with what was nearest in time and then went back to what was most remote – to his childhood – and rested there.

… And again his thoughts dwelt on his childhood, and again it was painful and he tried to banish them and fix his mind on something else.

… It occurred to him that what had appeared perfectly impossible before, namely that he had not spent his life as he should have done, might after all be true. It occurred to him that his scarcely perceptible attempts to struggle against what was considered good by the most highly placed people, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing, and all the rest false. And his professional duties and the whole arrangement of his life and of his family, and all his social and official interests, might all have been false. He tried to defend all those things to himself and suddenly felt the weakness of what he was defending. There was nothing to defend.

"But if that is so," he said to himself, "and I am leaving this life with the consciousness that I have lost all that was given me and it is impossible to rectify it – what then?" He lay on his back and began to pass his life in review in quite a new way.

In his book, *Death: The Final Surrender*, Cedric Pisegna writes,

We don't want to face our own mortality. When you're about to go before God – when a meeting with God is imminent – it's sheer terror. Scripture says it's a terrifying thing to go before God (Hebrews 10:31).

Even Jesus' disciples were terrified at their meeting with God on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8):

(Jesus) was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light… a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified.

However, the terror that we may experience poised at the entrance to eternity will be transformed into rapturous joy for those who know and love Jesus Christ.

I shall behold Your face in righteousness; I will be satisfied with Your likeness when I awake.
(Psalm 17:15)

Pisegna continues,

I went through my near-death experience. Everything on earth seemed so safe and secure. However, things are definitely not what they seem. Life on earth is illusory. We feel like we are the only ones present, but just beneath the surface of our consciousness, there's a whole new transcendent reality …

When we're before a two-way mirror, the person behind can see what we're doing, but we don't see him. Similarly, God is able to see our life as it's happening, but we're not aware of it …

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known(1 Corinthians 13:12)

Jesus said,

"Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

(John 20:29)

We will die as we have lived. If we've lived a virtuous life in faith – believing, giving our lives to Christ – we will die with great assurance and great comfort. But if we've lived a selfish life – a life disconnected from God–then we're going to die with regret …

Additionally, motivation and the focus of our desire is key. As Lee Strobel has noted: "There's a difference between wanting to avoid hell and genuinely wanting to spend eternity with God in heaven."

C.S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity,*

If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.

Pisegna again:

People wait 'till the last minute to try to get holy, but it's a lifestyle, it's a process. We've got to be invested in it now so that we will be ready. The Bible clearly warns that we die but once and then comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27). Indeed, our secrets will be revealed in the light of God's glory …

In 1 Corinthians we read,

… as the secrets of men's hearts are laid bare, they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!" (1 Corinthians 14:25)

Do not pronounce judgment before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. (1 Corinthians 4:5)

In Romans 2:6-8, we see that,

God will render to each one according to his works – for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. But to those who by patience in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, He will give eternal life.

Jesus says in John 5:24:

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Back to Pisegna:

The truth is, surrendering to God is very important. Because death is a natural part of life, day in and day out we must abandon ourselves to God. Then we will die as we have lived.

Trusting God is the purpose of our lives. People want to be in control. Ironically, the way out of it is to lose control. In many ways in life, we have a semblance of control, but the bottom-line is that we don't know when or how we're going to die. So much of our life is out of control. We think we're in control, but we're not.

At death, there will be a precious moment of compassion and healing for the believer. As Francis of Assisi said, "Death is the final healing." Indeed, "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of His saints" (Psalm 116:15).

In his article from *AllIsraelNews* about the dying of Rush Limbaugh, Joel Rosenberg writes,

Rather late in his life, in his final few years, Rush gave his life fully and completely to Jesus Christ …

When he shared that he had come to the very hard realization that he was under a "death sentence" and that time was running out, consider what Rush Limbaugh said on his October 19, 2021 program: "An Update on My Health: It's a Roller Coaster."

It's tough to realize that the days where I do not think I'm under a death sentence are over.

We all know that we're going to die at some point, but when you have a terminal disease diagnosis that has a time frame to it, then that puts a different psychological

and even physical awareness to it.

You know, I wake up every day and thank God that I did. I go to bed every night praying I'm gonna wake up. I don't know how many of you do that, those of you who are not sick, those of you who are not facing something like I and countless other millions are …But it's a blessing when you wake up. It's a stop-everything-and-thank-God moment.

Every day results in me feeling more and more blessed. Hearing from you, knowing that you're out there praying and everything else you're doing, that is a blessing. It's just a series of blessings. And I am grateful to be able to come here to the studio, tell you about it, and really maintain as much normalcy as I can.

I know a lot of you out there are going through your own challenges, whether it's cancer or another medical illness or some other life challenge. Maybe even in the hospital right now. Someone told me — I think this is good advice, may be helpful — the only thing that any of us are certain of is right now, today.... That's why I thank God every morning when I wake up. I thank God that I did. I try to make it the best day I can no matter what. I don't look too far ahead. I certainly don't look too far back.

I try to remain committed to the idea what's supposed to happen, will happen when it's meant to. I mentioned at the outset of this — the first day I told you — that I have personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

It is of immense value, strength, confidence, and that's why I'm able to remain fully committed to the idea that what is supposed to happen will happen when it's meant to.

There's some comfort in knowing that some things are not in our hands. There's a lot of fear associated with that, too, but there is some comfort. It's helpful… God, is it helpful. It's helpful to be able to trust and to believe in a higher plan.

So now the objective here is rounding third, not having to head back to second base and slide in there.... Here's to rounding third and heading towards home. That's the objective. That's the goal.

Life is brief.

On October 13, 2021, famed actor William Shatner – Captain Kirk to most of us – flew into space on Jeff Bezos' *Blue Origin* rocket ship. Upon landing, the 90-year-old Star Trek actor had this to say about the moment when the comforting blue sky suddenly fled away as they were thrust into the black darkness of space,

Is that the way death is: Woop, and life is gone? It's all so much larger than me and than life. It has to do with the enormity, the quickness, and the suddenness of life and death. My God! I want people to see the jeopardy, the vulnerability of everything. It's

so small: fifty miles up and then you're in death! You go: "Wow, that's death!" That's what I saw! I am overwhelmed. It's like being in battle only you're embattled inside yourself.

In *Macbeth*, William Shakespeare wrote,

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time. And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle. Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

The Bible repeatedly reminds us of the brevity of life on earth. In our earthly life, we are just a blip on the eternal screen of time and eternity:

You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes (James 4:14).

O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Surely a man goes about as a shadow! (Psalm 39:4-6)

Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow (Psalm 144:4).

Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth (Proverbs 27:1).

My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle ... My life is but a breath (Job 7:6-7).

You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before You. Everyone is but a breath, even those who seem secure. Surely everyone goes around like a mere phantom; in vain they rush about, heaping up wealth without knowing whose it will finally be (Psalm 39:5-6).

My days vanish like smoke (Psalm 102:3).

God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?..... Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? (Luke 12:20 & 25)

I can remember as a kid trying to figure out how old I would be when the 21st century hit. I worried that I could never live to that ripe old age of 50!

No matter what the age, however, the answer to the question can be found in the hymn, "Rock of Ages", by Thomas Hastings:

While I draw this fleeting breath,
When mine eyes shall close in death,

When I soar to worlds unknown,
See Thee on Thy judgment throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.

Jesus once said, “What profits a man to gain the whole world, but to lose his soul?” (Matthew 16:26) Yet, sadly, many today try to leave their mark on the *world* rather than in *heaven* and lose their soul in the process.

3 | When the rubber meets the road

It all began for me on a routine visit to the doctor when I told him about experiencing general discomfort in my chest. In the blink of an eye, I was hurried off to the "CAT scan" people – no resemblance to the "Cat People". The scan showed a growth in my heart. So it was off to the "MRI people" for a calcium-scoring scan, which showed major blockage in all the associated veins and arteries.

Since most of the males in both my father's and mother's lines died in their 60s from heart attacks, my concern began to grow. At 70 I was long overdue.

When I was a young man, I constantly flirted with death. Because of the pain in my soul, I wanted to die. But now that death began knocking hard at my door, something rose up inside that produced a fierce determination to live. It's a drive built into man's soul that shows itself in the moment of danger – the moment of impending death. Those who have tried to commit suicide often speak of this and are exceedingly glad that their attempt failed.

At that point, I was willing to say or do anything to stay the hour of death – even major heart surgery.

When it came to that final curtain, my faith was far weaker than I had imagined it to be. Still, I couldn't sing about the "final curtain" the way Frank Sinatra had, boldly declaring "I did it my way". I knew from Scripture that doing it "that way" would only result in eternal separation from God.

Though the rush of it all was daunting, spiritually I was ready to face the worst because of God's promise of heaven for those who follow His Son, Jesus. Indeed, since my life had been an extremely hard one, I almost welcomed it. (See my autobiography, *Love Hunger*).[1]

I began to wonder if I had been a walking shadow – "a poor player who strutted and fretted his hour upon the stage, and was then heard of no more". Perhaps I had been blind to the fact that I had "done it my way".

Had I fulfilled the call of God on my life? Had my motivations been godly? Had I been "serving" Him for my own glory and was about to see all my "good works" destroyed by fire? (1 Corinthians 3:10-15) When I stood before Him, would I hear Jesus say, "Well done good and faithful servant"? (Matthew 25:20-21)

The Puritans were an early group of believers who had sailed to American to escape the persecution they faced as Protestants in England, and then the Netherlands. They were very concerned about fulfilling God's purpose for their lives, as reflected in this prayer from *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions:*

> *Lord of all Being, there is one thing that deserves my greatest care, that calls forth my ardent desires – that is, that I may answer the great end for which I am made – to glorify Thee who hast given me being, and to do all the good I can for my fellow men.*
>
> *Verily, life is not worth having if it be not improved for this noble purpose. Yet, Lord,*

how little is this the thought of mankind! Most men seem to live for themselves, without much or any regard for Thy glory, or for the good of others. They earnestly desire and eagerly pursue the riches, honors, pleasures of this life, as if they supposed that wealth, greatness, merriment, could make their immortal souls happy. But alas, what false delusive dreams are these! And how miserable are those that sleep in them. For all our happiness consists in loving Thee, and being holy as Thou art holy.

May I never fall into the tempers and vanities, the sensuality and folly of the present world! It is a place of inexpressible sorrow, a vast empty nothingness. Time is a moment, a vapor, and all its enjoyments are empty bubbles, fleeting blasts of wind, from which nothing satisfactory can be derived.

Give me grace always to keep in covenant with Thee, and to reject as delusion a great name here or hereafter, together with all sinful pleasures or profits.

Help me to know continually that there can be no true happiness, no fulfilling of Thy purpose for me apart from a life lived in and for the Son of Thy love.

As author Randy Alcorn has written in his book, *The Law of Rewards: Giving What You Can't Keep to Gain What You Can't Lose*,

At death we put the signature on our life's portrait. The paint dries. The portrait's done. Ready or not.

I began having crazy thoughts like: Where at the table during the marriage supper of the Lamb will I be placed? Won't the table have to be a zillion miles long to fit everybody, and if so, how will I ever see Jesus? Might there be JumboTrons placed along the way, or will we operate in so many dimensions that we will all be sitting right next to Jesus at the same time? Will Jesus hug me on arrival? Will I be able to handle His loving presence without utterly losing control of my emotions? Will expected people be absent and unexpected people present? Who might they be? Will I be able to have quality time with David, Joseph, Moses, John, Paul and others whom I've admired or will the awesomeness of God make all these sorts of things irrelevant? Will I be able to fly or transport myself by thought to distant planets and galaxies? If so, will my new body be immune to the deadly radiation emitted by the stars? What will I do in heaven? Will there be autumn leaves or snow minus the bone-chilling cold? Will I suddenly have all knowledge, including an understanding of the Trinity? (I've been asking God about that one for years now. You have not because you ask not – right?)

I also wondered about my dead ancestors. Genealogical research has always been one of my delights and I have often wondered who among my relatives might be in heaven. Upon arrival, will they be aware that I have researched their lives? Will they care that I thought so much about them? Might our conversations take off more quickly as a result?

Or perhaps it's all unnecessary. Mark Twain once quipped,

Why waste your money looking up your family tree? Just go into politics and your opponent will do it for you.

One of my favorite TV programs is "Finding Your Roots" with Louis Gates, Jr. It's fascinating and comforting to know that, like those on the show, I'm part of an ancient line of relatives who struggled with things that now concern me. They probably spent a great deal of time pondering their death and what it would mean. They undoubtedly shared the same apprehension and hopeful anticipation that I have, especially as the moment of death drew near.

When I gaze upon the pictures and portraits shown on the TV program of those who were part of the lineage of the featured guests, I look at each face and wonder what they are doing now – either in heaven or hell – for they are still alive and always will be. At this very moment, they are experiencing never ending life and the experiences that are available to them at their eternal home.

In my case, I have pictures of ancestors that were taken in the 1800s, as well as books found online that some of them wrote during their time on earth. On my father's side, I came from a dynasty of Presbyterian pastors that go back to Scotland, England and Ireland. I am the fifth consecutive minister in that line, which opens up a host of questions about the parallels in our lives. It was a godly line that I am privileged to be a part of. Yet I wonder, if I looked further, would I find horse thieves and traitors, bigamists and murderers? How many left this life without a saving faith in God? Did they lie on the grass at night and ponder eternity while gazing at the Milky Way? Did they struggle with the same sin issues as I do? Was their form of death tragic or peaceful? What were their last words?

> *O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.*

I thought of words from a song by the music band, Mercy Me called "Even If:

> *It's easy to sing when there's nothing to bring me down. But what will I say when I'm held to the flame like I am right now?*
>
> *I know You're able and I know You can save through the fire with Your mighty hand. But even if You don't my hope is You alone.*
>
> *I know the sorrow and I know the hurt would all go away if You'd just say the word. But even if You don't my hope is You alone.*
>
> *You've been faithful, You've been good all of my days. Jesus, I will cling to You come what may, 'cause I know You're able, I know You can.*

A month earlier, I had contracted Covid, which had precipitated a heart attack. Not having had a heart attack before, I wasn't sure that it was one, so stayed at home, hoping it would go away – typical male, I suppose. After all, the Emergency Room (ER) visit would be $4,300 and the ambulance $5,300. Not knowing how much insurance would

cover, I compared the pros and cons of either dying or becoming destitute!!! I shuddered at the thought that I was even making such a comparison, yet it seemed so logical.

I told my "primary" doctor about the heart attack which precipitated an additional series of scans, blood tests, x-rays and electrocardiograms – all of which led to an unsuccessful $20,000 cardiac catheterization (stent) operation. My veins and arteries were too diseased for stenting.

The tension began to mount!

At that finding, they immediately rushed me to a cardiac hospital 100 miles away. It was quite the wild ride on a very rain-slick interstate though I was buoyed by the upbeat, caring dialogue shared by the guys in the ambulance. When you're an old guy, kindness by young people can be deeply moving and even tear inducing. "At least *someone* cares", I thought.

I wondered if I would survive the operation or if it was curtains for me. Would the "fat lady" finally sing her dirge? Would I have a near-death experience and watch the operation from the ceiling? As Lee Strobel describes in *The Case for Heaven:*

Thousands of patients have told stories about being clinically deceased and yet floating out of their body and watching resuscitation efforts from above. Many have described traveling through long tunnels, seeing deceased relatives and experiencing an astoundingly beautiful realm beyond our world. In a study of 1,400 Near Death Experiences (NDEs), cardiologist Fred Schoonmaker said fifty-five patients had their out-of-body experience during a time when they had no measurable brain waves. No measurable brain waves? Yet their consciousness continued? That would certainly put the possibility of an immaterial mind, or soul, on the table.

Within hours, the 7-hour operation began – a *sextuple* bypass! A sextuple bypass is considered to be the most intricate and surgically challenging of all operations. My cardiologist later confessed that it is one of the most traumatizing things that can be done to the human body and that mine was made worse by the damage done to my heart by Covid. Indeed, when I later read the detailed notes of the surgery, I was flabbergasted at the peril I'd been in – heart stoppage, massive bleeding, inability to find a single vein or artery that wasn't severely diseased. But as dire as that sounded, it was comforting to know that God was with me and still had plans for me.

Then began a week-long stay in the intensive care ward. I was pleasantly surprised that the after-surgery pain was less than I anticipated, though traversing the ten steps to the bathroom completely sapped me of energy.

Back to Richard John Neuhaus in *As I Lay Dying.* He had this to say about his own brush with death in the ER,

> *In the intensive-care unit, no longer in charge of anything: I was struck by my disposition of utter passivity. There was absolutely nothing I could do or wanted to do except to lie there and let them do whatever they do in such a place. Indifferent to time, I neither knew no cared whether it was night or day …There was nothing to be done, nothing I could do, except be there."*

... Death may be experienced as the final letting go of everything, body and spirit … This time, it's for keeps. When you are dying, you have to do something with yourself, and since there is very little you can do about yourself, the only thing to do is to give yourself away. It is something like a surrender … your self is being taken from you.

… It was with friends from my world that I became intensely aware of reactions … With men, there was an obvious nervousness that I might give them something; not my sickness, but something deeper that they wouldn't know how to handle, that they didn't want to learn how to handle.

… When dying seemed imminent, I noted the reactions most acutely. It was not said, but more than once I imagined someone thinking: "He is dying and I will go on living … and I don't know what to do with that." There was a distancing, a recoil, in visits paid that were but paying the dues of friendship. I did not resent that. I, too, had dutifully stood at the beds of the dying eager to get away untouched by death.

My stay at the hospital was embarrassing on so many levels, not the least of which was the presence of the nurses while I relieved myself, in case I fell or passed out. They even had the bed wired to alert them if I tried to go it alone!

It was also humiliating to endure the sing-songy tone that everyone used with me – as though I was a two-year-old. (Somebody should tell healthcare workers about that.) At least they meant well.

I rejoiced however, that a catheter was unnecessary. Sometimes it's the little things that matter the most – like no catheters, thrilling ambulance rides, or the simple kindnesses of those who are taking care of you.

I also rejoiced that my appetite vanished and I ended up losing 25 pounds! Almost worth another go. NOT!

All in all, the doctors and nurses were totally professional, kind and caring. There was one "Nurse Ratchet" however who made it clear to me that I was completely at her mercy and there was nothing I could do about it. I pretended to like her in order to avoid being impaled by the "Sword of Damocles" that she held over me.

Night and day, pills had to be taken and blood drawn every two hours. I wondered how I would ever be able to get better with no food or sleep, but it was what it was.

One night, I placed a pillow over my face to block the ever-present lights. Within minutes a half-dozen nurses came running in to find out why my oxygen levels had suddenly dropped!

Having for years seen doctors prescribe unnecessary medications and tests in response to "considerations" they received from the "medical industrial complex", or fear of being sued if they didn't, I wondered if that were true of the copious amount of drugs that I was being fed – including the dreaded potassium pill that even a horse couldn't swallow. Then there were x-rays, sonograms, and blood tests so numerous that I finally complained to the nurse that I was out of blood! I had become Dracula!

During the night, deep moans and cries from other patients filled the air. It was difficult to handle but gave me something to pray about other than myself. “At least I have a private room,” I thought.

In time, I was able to decipher the coded words that came over the loudspeaker. There was a code that carried a lot of urgency and a quieter one that brought the emergency to an abrupt halt – undoubtedly indicating the death of the patient. The best scenario was when there was no second code.

As kind as the hospital staff was, they couldn’t replace family and friends, however – none of whom knew anything about the emergency surgery and in any case, lived back east.

I contemplated the thought that I might come and go all alone and began to feel sorry for myself. By the grace of God, however, I little noticed the absence of visitors and kept myself occupied with Christian TV and thoughts of God, who promised He would never leave me nor forsake me (Deuteronomy 31:6-8).

At first, I had trouble praying – being not a little peeved with God for making me go through this great trial. Eventually I realized that God hadn’t put me through this–my lifelong choice of unhealthy foods was actually the culprit. In other words, I had done this to myself!

It was especially comforting to read Hebrews 4:16:

> *Let us approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

I would have to call upon that grace, confidence and mercy during the trials to come. As the inimitable Yogi Berra once opined, “It ain’t over ‘till it’s over, no matter how over it looks!”

I wondered what purpose God might have in keeping me alive through the gross extremeness of it all. “Was there something He still wanted me to do and if so, what might that be?”

God *had* kept me alive through many harrowing moments – the time I threw myself down the stairs as a nine-year-old; the day I started to jump from the Royal Gorge Bridge in Colorado only to have an angel push me back from the precipice; the three times I attempted to end it all with drug overdoses; three times when I knowingly went with people who I knew intended to take my life. During that final murder-attempt, God stopped a man from killing me in a darkened warehouse. All unbeknown to me! After ordering me to stand on a conference table under a spotlight, he quickly left the room and disappeared up into the rafters. Somehow I knew that he had gone there to shoot me with a crossbow that he owned – probably to videotape the murder for his own pleasure and that of his “friends”. I also realized that he was probably the infamous serial killer who was killing and dismembering blonde boys in Hollywood at the time. But while he was hidden above me, the very dark–almost demonic atmosphere suddenly changed, replaced by a harried confusion. The man hurried down greatly annoyed and drove me back to Hollywood. I knew that I knew that God had sent warring angels to throw his

plan into confusion so that I could continue to live and fulfill the purpose of my life.

As I lay there helpless and alone in my hospital bed, important incidents from my childhood flashed before my eyes: the wonderful family Christmases and vacations; my first love; the angst of adolescence; the fog of college; addictions galore; the invincibility of youth, made worse by reckless, death-wish-driven behaviors; seven years acting in TV and film, with the indescribable thrill of landing two starring roles; partying with the most beautiful, rich, and famous people on the planet; three suicide attempts followed by three attempts on my life; a year spent worshipping a guru as God; the glorious moment of salvation in the Garden of Gethsemane when the liquid love of the Holy Spirit poured into my heart; copious, supernatural answers to prayer that followed; three extraordinary years in seminary enjoying the life that Tevye dreamed of in *Fiddler on the Roof*– sitting with the holy men seven hours every day; "wilderness years" when God went silent; and forty years serving my Lord and Savior in ministry.

It had been a hard life filled with extreme highs and lows. The most imperiled years were the ones lived in Hollywood. During that time, there were only three things that kept me alive: the incredibly therapeutic, weekly improvisations with "Actors Studio" instructor Jack Garfein, daily trips to the beach, and late-night dancing at the disco – think Donna Summer, Gloria Gaynor, and the Bee Gees. Oh yeah – and I was good at it!

How odd it seemed that my life would come to an abrupt and ignominious end while alone in a hospital bed. In my imagination, my death was supposed to be glorious, with party hats, fireworks, whipped cream cake and a vision of the Lord coming to get me!

As a young person, I had avoided old people or anything that would remind me of death, even while courting it daily. Like most youths, I projected death far into the future and lived as though it couldn't happen except by my own hand.

In my first role as an actor, I scored a coveted "death scene". It was exciting because the more dramatic the scene, the more chances for glory. Little did I foresee, however, that one day my death would *really happen*!

In the film, I got killed by a fellow gang-member. It was now clear to me, however, that my actual death would almost certainly be a rather mundane affair. I would love it though if I left this earth uttering profound last words! When that veil is finally pierced, however, my chance will be over. I will no longer be able to store up treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21). The judgment seat of Christ will soon follow (Romans 14:10-12; 2 Corinthians 5:10), and only what I have done for Christ will last.

> *So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:9-10).*

But fret not, for our hope lies in the words of Jesus found in John 12:23-24: "If a grain of wheat (the believer) dies, it (death) bears much fruit."

The Bible says that when we turn to the Lord, the veil that Satan has draped across our minds is removed (2 Corinthians 3:16; 4:3-4). At death, that final veil will be

removed for everyone, but the opportunity to respond appropriately will have ended.

In God's eyes, this life is all about reversing the curse brought to the world by Adam and Eve when they refused to believe what God had told them. Jesus reversed the curse in eternal terms by paying the penalty for sin for all who would follow Him, but we are called to work that out in the choices we make (Philippians 2:12-13). Do we believe God in everything He says? With the help of the Holy Spirit, that's the direction we're supposed to be going in.

It's incredible when a young person dies, and near impossible to forget. In my lifetime, I have been a friend or relative in four such incidents, three of which involved motor vehicle accidents and the other, a murder. It's a reminder that none of us is guaranteed a long life and that young people should seek the help of God to work through that fact. As Saint Benedict often said, "Keep death daily before your eyes."

One way is through song. Everyone who has heard it loves the song by Mercy Me – *I Can Only Imagine* – especially the refrain:

Surrounded by Your glory

What will my heart feel?
Will I dance for You Jesus
Or in awe of You be still?
Will I stand in Your presence
Or to my knees, will I fall?
Will I sing hallelujah?
Will I be able to speak at all?
I can only imagine.

I've often heard criticism of the Bill Gaither videos (that feature great gospel songs and singers from the past) for singing songs about their impending transition to heaven and what that will be like. Such critics don't understand what happens to a person who has or is standing at the precipice of death. Those who sing of the eternal promises of God are calling in their chips. A sometimes unbidden evaluation of life is occurring and they want to know if their life has been worthwhile, if their service to God and His Kingdom has been fruitful. They're also longing to see loved ones who have gone before them and the face of the Son of God who rescued them from eternal damnation. Such longings grow exponentially when one faces death.

Life is hard, so they want to be reassured by the truths of Scripture that it is well with their soul and that all of life's pain and struggle has been worth it. This is natural and normal and happens to everyone who has the joy of knowing that soon and very soon, they're going to see the King. Heaven will be a sobering delight. When all is said and done, "I would see Jesus!" (John 12:21)

The last stanza of many great hymns speaks to this transition.

From "Rock of Ages" by Augustus Toplady:

While I draw this fleeting breath,
When mine eyes shall close in death,

When I soar to worlds unknown,
See Thee on Thy judgment throne
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.

From “And Can It Be” by Charles Wesley:

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

From “Be Thou My Vision” by Dallan Forgaill:

High King of Heaven, my victory won,
May I reach Heaven’s joys, O bright Heav’n’s Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.

From “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name” by Edward Perronet:

Oh, that with yonder sacred throng
We at His feet may fall!
We’ll join the everlasting song,
And crown Him Lord of all!

From “Be Still, My Soul” by Katharina Dorothea von Schegel:

Be still, my soul
The hour is hastening on
When we shall be
Forever with the Lord
When disappointment grief
And fear are gone
Sorrow forgot, love’s
Purest joys restored
Be still, my soul
When change and tears are past
All safe and blessed
We shall meet at last

From “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” by Charles Wesley:

Finish, then, Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation

Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in Heav'n we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

From "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" by William Williams:

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death and hell's Destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side.
Songs of praises, songs of praises,
I will ever give to Thee;
I will ever give to Thee.

From "How Great Thou Art" by Stuart K. Hine:

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart
Then I shall bow in humble adoration
And there proclaim, "My God, how great Thou art"

From "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus" by George Duffield:

Stand up, stand up for Jesus, The strife will not be long;
This day the noise of battle, The next the victor's song.
To those who vanquish evil a crown of life shall be;
They with the King of Glory Shall reign eternally.

From "Rejoice the Lord is King" by Charles Wesley:

Rejoice in glorious hope! Jesus the Judge shall come,
And take His servants up to their eternal home.
We soon shall hear the archangel's voice;
The trump of God shall sound, rejoice!

Entire gospel songs from the great Christian songbook have been written about the believer's transition to the next life – songs such as:

"I Bowed on My Knees and Cried Holy"

"We Shall Behold Him"

"I Want to See Jesus"

"Alpha and Omega"

"Goin Up Yonder"

"Precious Memories"

"Home"

“I’ll Meet You in the Morning”

“Satisfied”

“Your First Day in Heaven”

“When We All Get to Heaven”

“The Holy Hills of Heaven”

“Heaven’s Now My Home”

“Prince of Heaven”

“Streets of Heaven”

“Go Rest High on the Mountain”

“I Will Rise”

“Save a Place for Me”

“Soon and Very Soon”

“Because He Lives”

“Oh, What a Time”

“Beulah Land”

“Mansion on a Hilltop”

“When the Roll is Called Up Yonder”

“Will the Circle be Unbroken”

I recently watched the film, *The King and I*. The death scene of the King of Siam is one of the most powerful ever written and performed. The setting is a great room where we see the noble king – once of fierce countenance – prostrate on a jeweled, velvet couch. He had been the great king of Siam – a king who ruled with absolute authority – never to be questioned. Yet as he was slowly passing into the next life, his heir was already issuing proclamations about changes that he was going to make. As the vapor that was the king’s life began to dissipate, you see in the king’s face the inevitable resignation and yielding to death that all of us will face. The world simply went on without him.

As Dr. D. James Kennedy once said: “There are no pockets in a shroud.” Spending your life “wasting away in Margaritaville” is a really bad choice. You’re better than that! The game of life is a running clock. Seek truth in the pages of Scripture while you can still draw a breath, for the world is running out of truth. Begin with the Gospel of John. It’s stunning!

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1 https://masteringlife.org/shop/store/the-dr-david-kyle-foster-book-special-detail

4 | Being Remembered

After examining the history of how long the lives of those who were once famous have been remembered, Rev. Bobby Schuller observed,

Almost everyone will forget you except your family and the Lord.

Building kingdoms, riches and accolades on this earth will be rendered meaningless at death. In time, even most family members will forget you other than noting your presence on their family tree. But not in heaven! There we will know each other more deeply and richly than ever, and with great joy!

According to those who, like the Apostle Paul have visited heaven and returned, (2 Corinthians 12:2-4), most people there appear to be in their twenties or thirties – all except those who for whatever reason died in childhood. Those await their parents' arrival when they will be raised to adulthood. As my 80-year-old grandmother once exclaimed, "I'm still 18 inside!"

One of the biggest changes in my thinking caused by my brush with death in the hospital was a feeling of complete surrender to God's will. I saw clearly that anything that I had ever done for Him, had actually been a gift of grace by Him. He never needed me to serve Him. He had privileged me with the opportunity to do so and to be rewarded for it. But it had been Him working in me to bring fruit from the effort.

The Bible teaches that there will be a judgment for believers that determines what (if any) crowns we will receive from Jesus for the life we led on earth. However, when we see Him in heaven for the first time, the Bible says that we will then know that all our good works were inspired and empowered by Him. And so we will rightly cast our crowns at His feet, understanding for the first time that our crowns are really His crowns. That moment may be very near, even for those who are destined to die prematurely (as we count time). When we are in heaven, kneeling before His throne, hearing our good deeds being praised by Him, it will become clear to us that all the glory belongs to God.

> *Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now even more in my absence, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who works in you to will and to act on behalf of His good purpose. (Philippians 2:12-13).*

As if I were catapulted into another dimension of perception, I realized that most things that seemed important in life no longer mattered. They seemed oddly unimportant. There would be no Tesla towed behind my hearse, no gold bars, no award statues, no books, no videos – nothing!

One surprising impulse that hit me during this experience was the desire to give it all away. I know that in God's economy, a worker is worthy of his wages (1 Timothy 5:18) but the only return I now wanted was to help people without any consideration of

reward by them or by God. All of life was now consumed by a singular desire to know and love Jesus and to love others as myself (Matthew 22:36-40).

Theresa Noble has written the book, *Remember Your Death*. In it, she teaches how believers should think about death. On a recent talk show, she shared these things from her book:

As Adam and Eve were cast from the Garden of Eden, God said to them: "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return."

If we belong to the Lord, we need not fear bodily death. Thinking about death makes you more Christ and gospel centered.

The Cross changes everything! With the triumph of the Cross, remembering one's impending death involves not only remembering one's mortality but also Christ's victory over death. As it says in 1 Corinthians 15:54-55:

> *When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come to pass: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." Where, O Death, is your victory? Where O Death, is your sting?*

Theresa then shared from the "Daily Examen" of Ignatian Spirituality – essentially a review of the day that is focused on gratitude toward God:

Become aware of God's presence or seeming absence during the day. Pay attention to your emotions.

Respond to revelations of personal sin and desolation while asking God to bring even more light.

Review with gratitude all of God's good gifts of the day. Thank Him for His blessings.

Look toward tomorrow. Imagine yourself on your deathbed and think of your day in view of that.

– Thank God for another day of life.

Blind, deaf and mute, Helen Keller once wrote,

I cannot understand why anyone should fear death. Life here is more cruel than death. I believe that when the eyes within my physical eyes shall open upon the world to come, I shall simply be consciously living in the country of my heart.

A beautiful scripture that applies here is Ephesians 1:16-19:

I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which He has called you, what are the riches

of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His great might …

There are many deaths in life, such as death to self and death to the deeds of the body (Matthew 16:25; John 12:24; Romans 6:5-6; Galatians 2:20; 5:22-24; 1 Corinthians 15:31). Waiting for God to fulfill a vision that He gave you is a death of sorts.

Seeing the bigger picture helps considerably. One night, I was complaining to God about the wilderness period I was in and how it was killing me inside. I said, "Lord, I'm dying here!" to which He replied, "That's what's supposed to happen."

Similarly, as we draw close to the end of life on earth, the spiritual air around us starts to thin as the membrane separating us from the next life begins to weaken.

C.S. Lewis once observed,

Humans rarely pray for the thing God wants them to pray for — they simply want enough grace to see them through some moment or time of trouble... they conjure up a vision of the future they want and appeal for that outcome. They persist in wrapping their anxious hands around life's steering wheel as if "it's going to work this time if only they clutch it more tightly."

The point: The most difficult prayer for us to voice is, "Not my will, but Thine be done" (Luke 22:42). Ultimately, God the Father's will is going to be done so we might as well yield to it now. Declare with childlike faith, "Worthy or not, here I come!"

Oswald Chambers once wrote: "The core of all sin is the doubt that God is good." The sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Gethsemane was a refusal to believe in the goodness of God. In refusing to believe in His goodness, they decided He could not be trusted to tell the truth – a mistrust born of pride. They chose to believe that He was holding out on them. In doing so, they chose to be independent from God's counsel and to be the definers of truth – a position that echoes the postmodern idea that everyone creates *their own truth*.

In essence, they joined Satan's rebellion. But in His mercy, God created a way of escape from the eternal separation that they had brought upon themselves. He created a way for their sin to be covered by placing the penalty for it on His Son Jesus, who was in complete alignment with the Father's plan.

In essence, the trust, faith, and obedience God the Father wanted was credited to those who would believe in God the Son. The means by which His redeeming action is to be appropriated is by this re-acquisition of faith and trust in God. Indeed, obedience is the ultimate proof that you believe and trust in God.

Jesus indicated in John 14:21 and elsewhere that God's love language is "trust that bears the fruit of obedience". This is the faith that Adam and Eve rejected and that we must now reclaim. As the Scripture says in Hebrews 1:1: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen." Because man fell due to unbelief, he can only return to God's favor by believing in every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4).

5 | Recovery is Not a Straight Line

Recovery in the ICU was well paced. They soon had me making circles around the ward with a walker. I knew that the more I accomplished, the sooner I'd get out of there. I performed so well in fact that I became the marvel of the ward – at least that's what they told me. (One often wonders whether caregivers in such situations routinely exaggerate a patient's progress in order to produce hope and a better outcome).

After five days in the ICU, the heart surgeon finally came for a visit, shadowed by an entourage of fellow surgeons, nurses and other med students. Taking their cue from TV's Dr. Frazier Crane, they wanted to see the miracle that was me!

The cardiac surgeon was a short man who strode into the room with a Napoleonic air. He was clearly the "big boss" who reveled in his position, and in this case, heroic achievement. Everyone gave him such deference that I expected prostrations to follow. The only thing missing was the Marine Band playing "Hail to the Chief" or more appropriately perhaps, "La Marseillaise". I liked him all the more for his colorful personality though and would later write him a heartfelt letter of thanks for saving my life.

Pointing to "before and after" pictures of my heart, he exclaimed, "In my long career as a cardiac surgeon, yours was the worst I've ever seen!"

I didn't want to *hear* that! I didn't want to *see* that! I was hoping to hear words like "routine" and "a piece of cake" so I could go on pretending it never happened.

The doc was extremely delighted with what he had accomplished and wanted me to see it in glorious color. You'd have thought he'd painted a Picasso! I remember thinking, "Why in the name of all that is sacred and holy had they stopped in the middle of a near-death operation to take pictures?"

In the "before" picture, it looked as if my heart had separated into pieces with the center splayed open. It made me wonder about my childhood, when I repeatedly tried to stop my deep existential pain by forcing my heart to explode. Seeing the current picture of my heart, I thought, "So that's what a broken heart looks like!"

The "after" picture was beautiful in comparison – as if they'd purchased it from Shutterstock or Getty Pictures and were trying to pass it off as my own.

I asked him what the life expectancy of a post-op heart patient was and he said they didn't do that anymore, but that I would need another operation in about 5 or 8 years to replace the grafts that would probably wear out in that time.

They finally sent me home with "heart surgery" pillows, which I promptly threw away – not wanting any reminder of what I'd been through.

Ingloriously, I passed out as I was leaving the hospital. A dozen nurses were eating lunch at a nearby food truck, but they just stared at me as though I were a creature from outer space. None of us were "on the clock" anymore, so there it was. Finally, a passerby helped me to a nearby bench.

I began worrying that with the family back east, there was no one to help me. But God in His mercy sent a couple from church who took me into their home for three weeks! “Mike” had had the same operation and his wife “Darby” had nursed him back to health. They were the perfect solution – only something God could have cooked up! I’ll never forget their kindness. The first few nights, “Mike” even lay on the couch next to me to make sure that I’d be okay. I wondered if they were angels.

Upon arrival at their house, I proceeded to pass out again. As it turned out, “Nurse Ratchet” had neglected to provide me with oxygen to use at home.

Then came surprise number two! As I lay in Mike and Darby’s comfy La-Z-Boy, an intense cough began to develop that was so consuming that sometimes I couldn’t breathe.

Soon, I enjoyed another wild ambulance ride to the ER and another three days in the hospital while the doctors tried to figure out what had gone wrong.

It amused me that I enjoyed my two ambulance rides so much, especially since I could have died during each of them. In the past, whenever I’d see an ambulance racing through traffic, I’d wonder who was in it, what was wrong with them, and whether or not they would live. If they died, would they be met by Jesus or cast into uttermost darkness? As they teetered between life and death, the gravity of the situation was both frightening and sobering.

This second crisis turned out to be a major case of pneumonia. I was certain it would destroy all that had been achieved during the operation and lay there imagining all the glue and sutures and grafts being pulled apart. I determined that if the work of the operation came undone, I’d do nothing and be done with it. The specter of having to go through that operation again was unthinkable!

Fortunately, that didn’t happen and after three days, even though the coughing continued, I was discharged and soon returned to my own home.

The coughing still remained intense however. Alone in my bed at night, I was forced to abandon myself in absolute surrender to the mercy of God. The curious combination of the pain of pneumonia and the pleasure of finding a place of complete surrender to God was not lost on me.

I cried out, “God, please don’t leave me like this!” In an instant, the coughing stopped. A measure of pain still remained but the turbocharging of it had vanished. It was a great lesson in understanding the need for absolute surrender to God’s mercy. I had never been dependent on Him like that and was amazed to discover such an important, new dimension to the working of His power.

At this early point in my recovery, climbing stairs was unthinkable. Even a week later, I was unable to sit at my computer for more than an hour without getting completely exhausted.

Due to a deep root of rejection from childhood, I was reluctant to tell local friends and acquaintances about my situation. I was afraid that none of them would come see me. The pain of being alone was better than the pain of suffering more rejection – a recurring theme in my life. At least, *I* would be the cause of my loneliness rather than

others. After all, there was not much they could do for me.

Among those I did tell, family responded really well. Unexpectedly, it brought about reconciliation with an estranged brother who began to call me on a regular basis to give me the skinny on what was happening in my hometown. Though it was not the best time to hear about acquaintances that had died or were in the hospital, I was nevertheless glad for the well-intended kindness.

It was a great joy when my younger brother flew out to see me! When I was an actor in Hollywood during the 1970s, we had bonded while sharing an apartment as he pursued fame and fortune as a rock musician. We lived in a house previously owned by legendary actor, Lionel Barrymore, now divided into apartments, continually sharing war stories of auditions, callbacks, parties with the rich and famous, the joys and heartbreaks of "the business", and other such things. He has always been a great solace to me in times of trouble.

Others seemed to run in the opposite direction – a sad awakening for me. After almost 40 years of ministering with and to colleagues, it seemed as if none of that effort had resulted in genuine friendships – a state of affairs for which I share most of the blame.

Most people don't respond well to dying friends and acquaintances. We simply don't know what to say or do. It's a state of affairs that can dredge up traumas from their own past.

I began to berate myself for not having been a better friend to them. Sadly, my opportunity to rectify that was probably over due to my age and isolated location. I suddenly realized that I had interacted with them out of shared interest rather than a desire to know them as people. Otherwise they would have responded with a level of care and concern that went beyond Facebook emojis.

In short, I had never learned to love – a problem that is epidemic throughout culture.[2]

As C.S. Lewis once observed:

> *Love is something more stern and splendid than mere kindness … Love is not an affectionate feeling, but a steady wish for the loved person's ultimate good as far as it can be obtained.*

I consoled myself by remembering how difficult it had been for me to visit friends who were dying – even close relatives. For example, I delayed traveling to see my mother as she lay dying, and my pastor, as his son lay dying.

When I was in junior high, an 18-year-old family friend was killed in a car accident, causing great fear in me about death. How could a person so young die? It seemed so unfair. As I looked upon her body at the viewing, a kind of horror filled me that still revisits me when a friend or relation dies.

When I approached my father's coffin at his viewing, I was filled with dread. Upon spotting a Masonic ring that had been placed on his finger, I fell backwards into the arms of my brothers as a spirit of death hit me. Then I heard these ominous words, "He's mine

now!" But it was a demonic bluff and I knew it. My father was a godly man whose entire life had been devoted to loving and serving the Lord.

Though only revealed to 33rd degree Scottish Rite Masons, the gods of Masonry are Jah-Bul-On – a demonic trinity known in antiquity as Osiris, Ba'al, and the god of Jewish Gnostics – Jah. I knew, however, that being deceived in that way is not the thing that condemns a man to Hell. It is a refusal to surrender one's life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and His redeeming work on the Cross that keeps a person from entering the Kingdom of God.

Even so, the revisited trauma of seeing a corpse in a coffin caused me to vow never again to attend another viewing. I later stipulated in my Will that there is to be no viewing at my death.

After my surgery, all of the elaborate plans that I had put in my Will for a funeral with just the right songs to sing and scriptures to read flew out the window. They ceased to be important in light of the profundity and finality of death.

I determined to avoid becoming the old guy who endlessly talks about his various operations and medications. Instead of bringing out pictures of the grandkids, these guys will often try to show you their scars! In fact, when I told one guy at church about my ordeal, he proceeded to open his shirt in front of everyone to show me his quadruple bypass scar. I didn't want to *see* that, much less *hear* about it! I know he was trying to comfort me with the comfort he had received, but it did not comfort me!

People in general don't like talking about the details of medical procedures. I sure don't! Whenever someone starts talking about such things, I immediately cringe and plead with them to stop. It's one situation in which I don't mind risking offence.

Still today, upon seeing an actor or extra in an old movie, I sometimes pause to wonder what they're doing that very moment. What might Caesar be doing? What about Mao or Hitler or Mark Twain? Indeed, what about Adam and Eve, or Cain and Abel? What are they doing for fun? Do they watch television? Is Noah building miniature arks for visitors?

At other times, when seeing someone standing on a street corner, I often wonder what their life is like. What are the traumas and joys that have impacted their choices in life? Where are they headed for eternity?

As I've mentioned already, when we "cross over" and land on eternal shores, we will instantly know that being "somebody" never really mattered. In fact, our search for significance on earth had actually been a distraction from what *really* matters.

In 1273, the great theologian, Thomas Aquinas, author of voluminous tomes on theology, received a revelation from God that so affected him that it caused him to stop writing. He later said,

> *The end of my labors has come. All that I have written appears to be as so much straw after the things that have been revealed to me.*

Indeed, in the dance with death that had taken place in the operating room, I had reached what St. Ignatius called, "The point of indifference." It wasn't that I stopped

caring about good things, it was that most things that seemed good, were actually unimportant.

What is important is the deep cry of every heart whether they know it or not. It can be summed up in St. Augustine's words from his book, *Confessions*:

> *Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; Your power is immense, and Your wisdom beyond reckoning. You arouse us so that praising You may bring us joy. Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee… Scripture tells us that those who seek the Lord will praise Him, for as they seek they find Him, and on finding Him they will praise Him. Let me seek You then, Lord, even while I am calling upon You, and call upon You even as I believe in You … Is not the failure to love You woe enough in itself? My heart is listening, Lord; open the ears of my heart and say to my soul, I am yours. Let me run towards this voice and seize hold of You. Do not hide Your face from me: let me die so that I may see it, for not to see it would be death to me indeed.*

Dr J.I. Packer has written well about the invitation that God offers us and the surrender to His mercy and love that brings salvation:

> *Readiness to die is the first step in learning to live … There is no peace like the peace of those whose minds are possessed with full assurance that they have known God, and God has known them, and that this relationship guarantees God's favor to them in life, through death and on for ever … The life of true holiness is rooted in the soil of awed adoration.*
>
> *In the New Testament, grace means God's love in action toward people who merited the opposite of love. Grace means God moving heaven and earth to save sinners who could not lift a finger to save themselves. Grace means God sending his only Son to the cross to descend into hell so that we guilty ones might be reconciled to God and received into heaven.*
>
> *Few of us live daily on the edge of eternity in the conscious way the Puritans did, and we lose out as a result … Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.*
>
> *I do not want to believe [in hell], but I dare not disbelieve it … Felt weakness deepens dependence on Christ for strength each day. The weaker we feel, the harder we lean. And the harder we lean, the stronger we grow spiritually, even while our bodies waste away. To live with your 'thorn' uncomplainingly—that is, sweet, patient, and free in heart to love and help others, even though every day you feel weak—is true sanctification. It is true healing for the spirit. It is a supreme victory of grace.*

Dr. R.C. Sproul adds,

When there's something in the Word of God that I don't like, the problem is not with the Word of God. It's with me … God has entrusted to us the ministry of the Word, not its results … You can't open your eyes in this universe without seeing a theater of divine revelation.

There are only two ways of dying. We can die in faith or we can die in our sins … As soon as we think God owes us mercy, we're not thinking about mercy any more … The justice of God is always and ever an expression of his holy character. … What God does is always consistent with who God is.

When we sin, we not only commit treason against God, but we also do violence to each other. Sin violates people. There is nothing abstract about it. By my sin I hurt human beings. I injure their person; I despoil their goods; I impair their reputation; I rob from them a precious quality of life; I crush their dreams and aspirations for happiness. When I dishonor God, I dishonor all people who bear his image. Is it any wonder, then, that God takes sin so seriously?

British missionary to China, C.T. Studd, penned this famous poem on the subject:

Only One Life

Two little lines I heard one day,
Traveling along life's busy way;
Bringing conviction to my heart,
And from my mind would not depart;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Only one life, yes only one,
Soon will its fleeting hours be done;
Then, in 'that day' my Lord to meet,
And stand before His Judgment seat;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Only one life, the still small voice,
Gently pleads for a better choice
Bidding me selfish aims to leave,
And to God's holy will to cleave;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Only one life, a few brief years,
Each with its burdens, hopes, and fears;
Each with its clays I must fulfill,
living for self or in His will;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,

Only what's done for Christ will last.

When this bright world would tempt me sore,
When Satan would a victory score;
When self would seek to have its way,
Then help me Lord with joy to say;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Give me Father, a purpose deep,
In joy or sorrow Thy word to keep;
Faithful and true what e'er the strife,
Pleasing Thee in my daily life;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Oh let my love with fervor burn,
And from the world now let me turn;
Living for Thee, and Thee alone,
Bringing Thee pleasure on Thy throne;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Only one life, yes only one,
Now let me say, "Thy will be done";
And when at last I'll hear the call,
I know I'll say "twas worth it all";
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

In Psalm 90:12, Moses prays,

Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

As mature believers, let's not hold tightly to material things. We should focus our thoughts and energy on God, and contemplate the happiness reserved for us in that foreign land – that heavenly land of destiny. When we surrender our lives to Jesus Christ, we swap our worldly citizenship for citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20). We become aliens and strangers in this world even while remaining in it for a short time as ambassadors of the Kingdom of God (1 Peter 2:11; Hebrews 11:13, 16a; 1 John 2:15-17; James 4:4).

In his book, *Immortal*, Clay Jones adds,

If we're not going to fear death, we must love the Lord with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength and not love this present world. After all, if we love this present world, if this world consumes our hearts, then we're certainly going to dread leaving

it. In 1 John 2:15-17, we are commanded, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever." Notice that this world is dying—it is "passing away" (even atheists agree with that!)—and if you love the world, then you won't love the Father, and when the world dies, you will die with it. Instead, John tells us, "Do not love the world." If you can do this, you will abide forever!

If you don't want to fear death, then you need to choose to not love this world or the things of this world.

As C.S. Lewis, said in *Mere Christianity,*

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or to be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death.

Hymn writer, Isaac Watts, had this to say on the subject,

Teach me the measure of my days,
Thou Maker of my frame;
I would survey life's narrow space,
And learn how frail I am.
A span is all that we can boast,
An inch or two of time;
Man is but vanity and dust
In all his flower and prime.
See the vain race of mortals move
Like shadows o'er the plain;
They rage and strive, desire and love,
But all the noise is vain.
Some walk in honor's gaudy show,
Some dig for golden ore;
They toil for heirs, they know not who,
And straight are seen no more.
What should I wish or wait for, then,
From creatures earth and dust?

They make our expectations vain,
And disappoint our trust.
Now I forbid my carnal hope,
My fond desires recall;
I give my mortal interest up,

And make my God my all.

The writer of Hebrews (12:1-2) tells us,

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

God says in His Word,

He has determined the number of man's days … He did this (allotted periods and boundaries) so that men would seek Him and reach out to Him and find Him (Acts 17:26-27).

Man's days are determined; You have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed (Job 14:5).

All the days ordained for me were written in Your Book before one of them came to be (Psalm 139:16).

Now this is eternal life: that they may know You (God the Father), the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent (John 17:3).

During my years in Hollywood, it was reported that every week there were 300 unclaimed John Does in the morgue. Many were kids who went to Hollywood to fulfill their dreams but found themselves at the mercy of evil men and women.

I should have been one of them. Spending hours on the streets, partying and hitchhiking, I repeatedly encountered men who tried to kill me. On one occasion, a man drove me down a dark street and began to viciously strangle me – threatening to shoot me if I resisted. As I yielded myself to death, God caused a voice to speak out of me saying, "But I'm a good person!" Instantly, the man stopped and ordered me out of the car. Evidently, men who kill hitchhikers often think they're doing God a favor by getting rid of bad people. If I was really a good person, in his twisted mind he could no longer justify murdering me. It was as though God had sent a spirit of confusion into his mind. I ran for my life, screaming at God, "God, I hate You! Why do you keep saving my life?" The irony was that I wanted to die and was peeved and confused that God kept rescuing me.

In Ecclesiastes 3:1-3, we read,

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal, a time to break down, and a time to build up …

It should not surprise us then that for some, in circumstances that should have ended in their deaths, God intervenes to prevent their early demise. There's still something He wants us to do – most importantly, to surrender our lives to His divine mercy and love.

In John 11, we read the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Of course, one purpose in doing so was to prove that He was the Messiah, for in Jewish thought, only the Messiah could raise people from the dead (or heal someone born blind, which He also did). In the incident, Jesus declares to Mary,

I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die … Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

It must also be said, however, that considering the fact that God numbers our days before one of them has begun, Lazarus clearly had other works to perform before being welcomed into heaven.

In John 14, Jesus adds,

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also … I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also. From now on you do know Him and have seen Him … I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you also will live … Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

In her book, *Angels are for Real!* Judith MacNutt wrote about the moving death of her mother and a friend named Lizzie:

There was a time in my life when the "veil became thin" between earth and heaven, a time when I released two "mothers" into God's loving care …

The day mom died, I intensely believed I could not live without her … When I searched her face in the hospital, I realized that she was desperately holding on until we released her. But how could I release someone who was everything to me?

During that agonizing moment, I did what she had taught me to do – I turned to Jesus. I asked Him to give me the grace and the courage to release her. I felt as though time stood still. A strong presence surrounded us … I felt physically supported by strong arms, and a great peace enveloped me. My fear was ebbing away in the light of that presence.

As I gazed at Mom, I watched the strained tension melt from her beautiful face and a dazzling light literally glow from within her. Her pain was gone, and she was ready to go to Him, the lover of her soul. She had passionately loved Him in this life, so she longed to go to Him now. I could hear the words of the Song of Solomon, which she had read to me many times: "My lover spoke and said to me, 'Arise my darling, my beautiful one, and come with Me. See! The winter is past …'" (Song of Solomon 2:10-11).

Crying softly, I heard myself saying to her, "Don't worry, Mom, it's all right; it's time for you to go with Jesus. We'll be fine." Those words were the ones her spirit had been waiting to hear. … Her work was finished … God's radiant presence enveloped her as her spirit departed from her broken and lifeless body. Angels carried her to her eternal home.

Then, there was the death of her dear friend Lizzie.

I received the tragic news that Lizzie had suffered a massive stroke ...

As I sat beside the hospital bed, I held Lizzie's hand while I prayed quietly. I felt as though my heart would explode at any moment. My emotions were still raw from grieving the loss of Mom. I did not know how to respond to the fearful reality that I might lose Lizzie. I wanted to escape and get lost in denial – to shake off the fear and sorrow of this present moment. Darkness was descending on my soul …

I fearfully surrendered my heart to God in that moment and embraced the joyful sorrow of this time of holy transition with her. Intuitively, I knew that Lizzie was leaving us. Opening my Bible, I began to read John 14:2-3 to Lizzie as she slept.

A profound grace entered my heart as I read aloud these comforting words. Jesus was coming to take His beloved Lizzie home. As my heart was emptied of the gripping fear, I felt an infusion of gratitude for the joy of having known this amazing woman … It was a sacred time. The room, which was slightly darkened by the fading day, was suddenly illuminated by a brilliant white light. Without warning, Lizzie, who had been deeply sleeping ever since I had been with her, sat up in bed and lifted her arms toward the source of light. Her face became radiant with a smile that erased the pain etched there just moments before.

I asked her, "Lizzie, what is it? What do you see?"

She answered with childlike joy in her voice, "Don't you see them? … On the mountain, I see my Jesus with His angels. He's calling me to come to Him. I've got to go! He's come for me!"

Jesus was summoning Lizzie to Himself. It was a holy and breathtaking moment …

Lizzie died in the arms of Jesus and was escorted by His holy angels to her eternal home.

Evangelist Luis Palau recounts a near brush with death:

I felt like I was on heaven's doorstep. I was knocking, but it wasn't time to go in yet. Soon though. Maybe quite soon.

My view of heaven wasn't changed. It was enhanced. Now I read the Bible with very open eyes. Every mention of heaven is underlined in green, with a little dot. Things that didn't seem so important before now have taken on a whole new meaning. They've become personal. I've started visualizing me seeing the great throne of God, me walking the glorious streets, me reuniting with those who have gone before.

I long to see the very face of Jesus, my Savior. The first thing I'll do is fall before Him with a heart overflowing with gratitude and praise. I want to encounter the Father and the Holy Spirit in a personal way.

Clay Jones again:

If Christianity is true, suffering has meaning. Suffering unsettles our worldliness. Suffering humiliates our self-deification. Suffering drives us to find an end to suffering, and if we humble ourselves, suffering can drive us to focus on the end of all suffering that is available for all eternity for those who trust in Jesus's suffering and death for us on the cross.

All of chapter 15 in 1 Corinthians is a treatise on the fact that every human will be raised from the dead at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ – some to eternal separation from God (which is darkness) and others to eternal life with God in heaven. It is our choice which place we will go. Although the path to heaven can at times be arduous in this life, it is the only path to an extraordinary Future.

Of that resurrection to life, the Apostle Paul says,

In the resurrection of the dead, a perishable body is sown to be raised again as an imperishable body. It is sown in dishonor but raised in glory; sown in weakness, but raised in power. It is sown a natural body, but raised a spiritual body.

Then, we can declare with Paul:

The dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory. "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

A month after my operation, the bill arrived – $725,000!!! – and that didn't even

include the cost of the surgeon! A friend told me his heart surgery had cost $1 million. Thank God for Medicare or I would have died just from seeing that bill. This might be what God does to Scottish and other super-thrifty people to get them to surrender. It was as if God had saved me from experiencing physical death in order that I might learn to die to myself. One might call it a “severe mercy”.

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2 https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/what-to-do-if-you-struggle-to-truly-love-others.html

6 | Legacy

Then there was the matter of "legacy". In his book, *Immortal: How the Fear of Death Drives Us and What We Can Do About It*, Clay Jones writes,

> *UCLA professor of thanatology Edwin Shneidman writes of the horror of leaving no legacy: "To cease as though one had never been, to exit life with no hope of living on in the memory of another, to be expunged from history's record—that is a fate literally far worse than death*
>
> *The Spanish philosopher and playwright Miguel de Unamuno writes: [Man pursues a legacy] out of a terror of extinction. It is the means by which he escapes from being nothing.*
>
> *Right up there with striving for immortality through having children is striving for immortality through creating something lasting. Many children have been neglected or even abandoned by parents in such pursuits. People are desperate to create something of lasting worth as a means of symbolic immortality, such as writing a book, inventing a vaccine or an artificial heart, building a temple, painting a masterpiece, and so on.*
>
> *Trying to live on through doing something wonderful that will be remembered only on earth is like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic after it had hit the iceberg. The deck chairs may indeed look nicer than they did before you employed your feng shui, but they're going to be a jumble at the bottom of the ocean, so who cares? But live a life of loving the Lord and your neighbor as yourself, and your deeds will follow you into eternity.*
>
> *In Charles Dickens' classic book,* A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge, cries out to the Ghost of the Future, "Hear me! I'm not the man I was. I will not be the man I have been". From then on Scrooge is a changed man and helps others. Why? Because Scrooge didn't want his legacy, his postmortem existence, to be no more than a neglected gravestone.*

Soon, I began assessing my life's legacy and realized that though some would say I'd served the Lord well, all I could see now was the self-glorying motivations that lay behind those actions. My childhood need for affirmation overshadowed all else. The work that I had put in to righting the wrongs of my youth had shifted my focus from bringing glory to God, to bringing glory to David. I could see clearly now that the underlying motivation had been sullied by my drive to win the affirmation never received in childhood.

Clay Jones writes,

> *Seeking to make a name for yourself apart from the Creator is idolatry. Instead of worshipping the only true God, we can attempt to become our own gods. It causes*

people to ignore relationally and spiritually essential things.

C.S. Lewis puts it this way:

> *We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or goodlooking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better looking than others. If every one else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest.*

Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–80 BCE) had this to say about the fleeting nature of symbolic immortality,

> *What is the advantage of having one's own name on the lips of future generations when their overriding concern will be the same as ours: to have their names on the lips of successors…How does that confer any reality on us? If you do achieve symbolic immortality, the chief concern of those who recognize it will be to outshine you or even diminish you.*

In his own reflections on death, as he lay dying, Richard Neuhaus wrote,

> *What had happened with Christ would happen, was happening with me. His death and His life anticipated my death and my life. …In the destiny of Christ is my destiny, and so it had been all along, and so it would be forever … What is now imperfect will one day be perfected in resurrection … Mortal dust already stirs with its longing for that great reunion … Sickness is an enforced pause for the counting up of our friends, and being grateful …*
>
> *"Holy indifference" is what the spiritual manuals describe as "a quality in a person's love for God above all that excludes preferences for any person, object, or condition of life … I was surprisingly indifferent to whether I would live or die. It probably had less to do with holiness than with my knowing that there was nothing I could do about it one way or the other … That I might live was not a particularly joyful prospect. Everything was shrouded by the thought of death, that I had almost died, that I may still die, that everyone and everything is dying. These friends who said they were thinking about me and praying for me all the time I knew also went shopping and visited their children and tended to their businesses, and there were long times when they were not thinking about me at all. More important, they were forgetting the primordial, overwhelming, indomitable fact: We are dying! Why weren't they as crushingly impressed by that fact as I was?*
>
> *(In NYC) death was everywhere. The children at the playground I saw as corpses covered with putrefying skin. The bright young model prancing up Park Avenue with her portfolio under her arm and dreaming of the success she is to be, doesn't she know she's going to die, that she's already dying? I wanted to cry out to everybody and everything, "Don't you known what's happening?" But I didn't. Let them be in their innocence and ignorance. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.*

… How is it possible that so many different, even conflicting, emotions can coexist? To be shattered, and at the same time to be indifferent, tranquil, almost insouciant about what was happening and what is going to happen.

… One saint had said, "He neither feared to die nor refused to live."

… I recalled the old saw that there are five stages in life: childhood, youth, adulthood, middle age, and "You're looking so well!"

… The embarrassing truth is I felt a certain resentment about people rushing my recovery. Didn't they know I was still teetering between life and death? Some people appeared to be in an unseemly hurry to drop the curtain on my drama.

… A year after John Donne almost died and then lingered for months by death's door, he wrote,

> *Though I may have seniors, others may be elder than I, yet I have proceeded apace in a good university, and gone a great way in a little time, by the furtherance of a vehement fever.*

So I too have been to a good university, and what I have learned, what I have learned most importantly, is that, in living and in dying, everything is ready now.

Many cry, "Why?" when loved ones suffer and die.

In the aftermath of my brush with death, a strange thing happened to me, unsought. All of the things that I held as of great importance (mostly ministry-related) no longer seemed as important as developing a significantly deeper and more intimate relationship with Christ – something I had preached on for the past 40 years and had so often been too busy to pursue. Sixty and seventy-hour workweeks had dominated my life for a decade or more while producing, writing and directing a television show and three films. For years, it had been my #1 teaching topic – the "prime directive" of life and the most important purpose of life itself.

My greatest fear had been dying at home undiscovered for weeks or months. That didn't go away.

After the operation and for weeks beyond, I sometimes just cried when thinking or talking about my brush with death – about nothing in particular and about how life-changing traumas can come upon someone, anyone, unexpectedly, and how life as you know it, could be cast into nothingness.

Beyond awareness, I later mused, was a fear of the finality of it, a concern that most of my "service" to the Lord fell way short of what could have been and that I would thus not hear "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" upon arrival at the pearly gates of heaven. All of the unfinished tasks of life came rushing in and I could barely process them all. Too overwhelmed, I retreated into indifference to my plight and all the things of this world.

As Terry Wardle puts it: "Coming to the place where we say to God: 'You choose!' "

Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen writes in *Divine Intimacy*:

Following Christ's example, a Christian must seek only the glory of God. He must desire no other glory save that of being a child of God, a brother of Jesus Christ, and a member of His Mystical Body – a singular glory, indeed!

We must be on our guard against that tendency of pride which inclines us to seek a little satisfaction, praise, and personal glory even in our most spiritual actions. If we seek glory for ourselves, though it be only in insignificant matters, this glory is of no value; it elevates us in the eyes of men, but lowers us in God's eyes; it lessens and may even endanger our glory as children of God.

Seeking human glory and taking pleasure in it hinder and blind us on our way to perfection. Jesus said to the proud, haughty Pharisees, "How can you believe, who receive glory from one another, and the glory which is from God alone, you do not seek?" Only profound humility will enable us to overcome the allurements of pride, to silence the interior voices of self-esteem and vain complacency in order to seek always and in everything the glory of God. St. John of the Cross urges us to fix our eyes on the interior dispositions of Jesus and to renounce everything "which does not lead to the honor and glory of God, and this for the love of Jesus Christ, who sought no satisfaction in this life but the accomplishment of His Father's will."

As D.L. Moody once said:

Moses spent 40 years thinking he was somebody, 40 years learning he was nobody, and 40 discovering what God can do with a nobody.

"O Lord, give me Your love for Your Father's glory, so that I too, wretched and poor though I am, may serve my God in some small way and give Him glory."

After my operation my appetite for food completely vanished and took months to return. I had had a hard life and often thought and sometimes wished I'd been taken home. Then I felt it very strange that I would have such thoughts.

7 | Musings

In spite of everything I knew to be true about a believer's death and the attitude of mind one should have in meeting it, it didn't go as expected. Instead, I was flooded with pedestrian thoughts that seemed to mock the deeply held, higher truths that I had vigorously taught mere days before. I had been looking for love my entire life, hurtling down rocky paths to find it, and now that I seemed likely to meet "Love" Himself, I hung back in shame.

I wondered if God saved me from death because I still had something important to accomplish, and if so, what might that be? Did He want me to close my ministry and do something completely different? Was He going to send funding to cover the expenses of our latest, though unfinished documentary film? Did He want me to write this book on my near-death experience and what I had learned from it? Would He use it to save people and assure others? All of the above?

I wondered if the purpose of the whole thing was to humble me and get me in the frame of mind that would cause me to pursue Him with abandon – a prayer that had been mine ever since my wilderness period of aridity had begun many years earlier.

What was going to happen when I died? My fears were not so much about dying but at how I'd get there. Would it be painful? Would I have to go through Alzheimer's, cancer, or some other painful or tragic end?

Was this merely the kind of thing that everyone must go through in this fallen world? Was obtaining the coveted "handicapped" placard for my car going to be it?

Change has never been easy for me so it was not surprising that it would turn out to be one that was fearful to contemplate.

Other contemplations that filled my days included:

- a rehearsal of childhood hopes and dreams
- new and repeated reality checks about life
- the day my father threw away many of my most cherished things (e.g., baseball cards, records) when I was off at college
- feelings of being so alone and unappreciated that I decided my body might as well be placed inside the "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier" in Arlington National Cemetery
- realizing that though we all die alone, some die more alone than others
- recounting the testimonies that I'd read of those who'd said or did something profound on their death beds – some who died cursing God, others praising Him, still others who heard Him whisper to them "Don't be afraid!"
- the sense of being blindsided – "hit by a Mack truck" as it were with the reality that my time was likely over, or very near – that I'd had my last chance to do something meaningful – something that pleased God
- a feeling of wanting to paint, "Kilroy was here!" on some rock somewhere

And, O my, the silly, random thoughts I had about what heaven would be like:

- How far back would I be in God's presence up there?
- Would I be given a job that I didn't like?
- Would I get bored or sick of all the "niceness" up there?
- Would I run out of things to do and places to go during the infinity of time and space?
- Would Jesus smile at me?
- Would He hug me?
- Would I be able to handle such an intensely longed–for moment if He did?
- Would I know everything?
- Would I travel by thought?
- Would I still read, study and meditate on the Scriptures?
- Would I be shown my entire life?
- Would I be able to travel in time and witness some of the dramatic events that had happened during man's history?
- Would I be able to traverse the universe and see the sights there?
- How often would I see the manifest presence of God?
- Would I, as the Bible indicates, judge only the bad angels or also the good ones?
- If I'm asked to judge good angels, what could I possibly judge them for?
- Would there be dark chocolate there?
- Since the Bible indicates that we will be able to eat in our new bodies, (re: the marriage supper of the Lamb; Jesus eating food with His disciples after His resurrection), would we also have to go to the bathroom? Could it possibly be considered heaven if we did?

Friends who survived bypass surgery and its aftermath testified that they felt 100% better after the surgery was over because the blood was now flowing unimpeded. Yet, I didn't feel any different.

The heart surgeon had told me that they were unable to find an artery or vein that wasn't heavily diseased and had had to use the *least* diseased ones. I wondered how much shorter my life after surgery would be as a result.

Crazy stuff, that!

Of life and death, St. Augustine of Hippo wrote,

> *Of all things in the world, only death is not uncertain. Everything else about us, good as well as evil, is uncertain. When the child is conceived, perhaps he will be born, perhaps there will be a miscarriage. Perhaps the child will grow up, perhaps not; perhaps he will grow old, perhaps not; perhaps he will be rich, perhaps poor; perhaps honored, perhaps humiliated; perhaps he will have children, perhaps not. And the same is true of whatever other good things you may name.*
>
> *Consider also all the evils there may be; for all, everywhere, it is true that perhaps*

they may be, perhaps not. But can you say of someone: Perhaps he will die, perhaps not? As soon as a person is born, it must at once and necessarily be said: He will not escape death.

In his book, *Immortal*, Clay Jones reminds us,

But death is a triumphal graduation for the saved! For the Christian, death is an upgrade. In Jesus, you can live forever and ever. As it says in Revelation 2:7, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." Do you hear what the Spirit is saying? Remain in Jesus, and you will live forever!

After all that, do I believe in heaven? Am I certain about it?

YES!

8 | Life Without End

It was 1980. I'd been an actor in Hollywood most of the 70s and was living in an ashram – daily "doing pranam" as I worshipped Guru Maharaj Ji – when it became clear that he was not a reincarnation of Jesus Christ after all. At that point, Jesus became the only one left to turn to, so I hopped a plane to Israel to find Him. To my utter shock and delight, He revealed Himself to me in the Garden of Gethsemene with a torrent of liquid love so intense that I thought I would die from it (John 4:7-14; 7:37-39; Revelation 7:17).

He was everything I had ever wanted – love personified. I had just been asking Jesus if He was truly God and really the only way to be saved from this wretched world, committing myself to follow and obey Him as best I could for the rest of my life. Then life began. Now I was living in the real world. It was not lost on me that God had saved me in the very Garden where Adam and Eve had first rebelled against Him.

You could offer me the kingdoms of this world but in comparison to Him, my response would be "Fuggedaboutit!

God revealed Himself in an unmistakable and miraculous way simply because I held Him to His promise in Jeremiah 29:11-14 – that He would reveal Himself to anyone who would seek Him with all their heart. (See also Proverbs 8:17 and Hebrews 11:6).

Invite Him in and He will cleanse you from all the effects of sin, dry your eyes, utterly transform your life, and begin preparing you for an eternity with Love Itself in the joys of heaven.

Picture the indescribable moment when you finally see Jesus, the Lover of your soul, face to face. There will be no words–just tears of unspeakable joy and wonder! On earth, there have been times when just the mention of His name unleashes a river of tears and emotions in me. "Verklempt" is a good word for it. But in that moment, there will be no words–just ecstasy, joy, wonder, and amazement. For it was Jesus who reached into the depths to rescue me from an indescribable state of emptiness and despair. He didn't look at my filthiness or rebellion. What He saw was the one He loves and would do anything to rescue – yes, even to the point of allowing evil men to torture Him to death on a cross.

The words of Dottie Rambo's classic song, "We Shall Behold Him", try to capture that moment:

The sky shall unfold
Preparing His entrance
The stars shall applaud Him
With thunders of praise
The sweet light in His eyes, shall enhance those awaiting
And we shall behold Him, then face to face
O we shall behold Him, we shall behold Him
Face to face in all of His glory
O we shall behold Him, yes we shall behold Him
Face to face, our Savior and Lord

In heaven, eternity is transformed into an unmeasurable, never-ending, intimate relationship with God Himself, with pure Love Himself. That glorious never-ending moment will always be with us because heaven is the place where God the Father transforms time into eternity (John 17:3). Though eternity became measurable when we turned our backs on God, in our eternal home it reverts to our created state of perpetual glory.

In our ignorance and rejection of God in times of trial and tragedy, we cannot see His beauty, nobility, tenderness and power. Neither can we see the *true* causes of all suffering and evil: Satan Himself and the deceitfulness of our own hearts. As one pastor put it: "Satan uses weapons of mass deception" and has made fools of us all.

We all need to come to the point Job came to in 13:15, when after losing everything, he stood his ground and declared

Though He slay me, I will hope in Him!

As Simon Peter said to Jesus in John 6:68-69,

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."

In the old British TV mystery program, Inspector Morse says,

To make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.

We're told in Revelation 21:1-8,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." Then He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. "He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

The truth is, when we die, true life has only just begun. Jesus said,

Now this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus

Christ, whom You have sent.(John 17:3)

As I stood at the precipice of death, it became clear to me that the 70 years of my life were just the precursor to a life without end, crafted from my relationship with God and service to His Kingdom on this earth. As Clay Jones writes in his book, *Immortal,*

> *The essential you—your soul, your consciousness—will absolutely, positively not experience death. Remember, you're not a body that has a soul; you're a soul that has a body. Your body enables your soul to interact with the physical world. So even though your body dies, your soul will not be harmed. Jesus said some amazing things about death. In John 8:51, Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word, he will never see death."*
>
> *What happens to your soul when you die? The answer is that your soul will be immediately transferred into the spiritual realm—"to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant" (Hebrews 12:22-24). As Jesus says in Luke 23:43 to the thief being crucified next to Him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (one of the biblical names for heaven). There will be no delay. In fact, your transition into the unseen realm will be so smooth, so seamless, and so natural, it may take you a while to realize you've died. If you happen to turn and see your body lying on the floor, or in a mangled car, or on an operating table, then you can take that as evidence of your passing.*

9 | The Glorification of the Believer

In a very unexpected teaching, Jesus and the Apostle Paul speak of the glorification of believers – beautifully summed up in this message by Pastor Ken Burgess:

> *In the mind of God we are already seen as glorified in heaven (Romans 8:30), yet it is something to be hoped for, to be revealed and obtained in the future. We know that the glorification of the believer happens at the resurrection at the rapture.*
>
> *There are three facets of salvation – regeneration, sanctification, and glorification. Regeneration is the new birth when we are placed in Christ. Sanctification is the process of growth as we become more like Christ. Glorification is the final stage when we are like Christ. These facets have to do with being freed from the penalty, the power, and the presence of sin.*
>
> *Glorification involves the believer's moral perfection (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; Hebrews 2:10-11), in which the believer will be made glorious, holy, and blameless (Ephesians 5:7). The process of sanctification is at work in us now (2 Corinthians 3:18) but moves from one degree of glory to another until it reaches final glory.*
>
> *Glorification is deliverance of the body from its unredeemed state (Romans 8:23; 1 Corinthians 15:43; Philippians 3:21). The glorified body is immortal, imperishable, powerful, and spiritual.*
>
> *Glorification brings participation in the kingdom of God (1 Thessalonians 2:12), and reigning with Christ (2 Timothy 2;10-12).*
>
> *Glorification is partaking in God's own glory [Romans 5:2; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; 2 Thessalonians 2:14; 1 Peter 5:10].*

Clay Jones lists four facets of glorification that believers will experience upon seeing God face to face in heaven. Our judgment for rewards will be based solely on what we did with what God gave us …

1. We will be resurrected with a spiritual body. (Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 15:42-44; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Corinthians 15:49; John 20:6-7)

2. We will be perfected. (Matthew 5:48; Hebrews 10:14; 12:23)

3. We will be made resplendent—beautiful and shining in splendor. (Exodus 28; 34:30; 2 Corinthians 3:7-8; Colossians 3:4; Daniel 12:3; Zechariah 9:16; Matthew 7:2; 13:43; Luke 9:31; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 9:7-8; 21:9-11; 22:5)

4. We will be honored by Jesus Himself and made renown in heaven. (John 5:44; Philippians 1:11; Ephesians 2:6; John 17:21-23; Revelation 3:21)

One of C.S. Lewis' most quoted passages is found in his lecture "The Weight of Glory":

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.

Lee Strobel writes in, *The Case for Heaven,*

How can our lives change today in light of heaven? Well, if the Jesus story is what leads us to our heavenly home, shouldn't we delve deeper into his teachings—and commit to applying his wisdom to our everyday lives?

Knowing that we will someday inherit the riches of heaven, shouldn't we stop clinging to the earthly possessions that take our attention away from what's really important? Anticipating a paradise of eternal pleasures, shouldn't we stop our mindless pursuit of substitute indulgences that only bring fleeting enjoyment and leave lasting regret?

In the new heaven and the new earth, everything will be made right, so shouldn't we start setting things right in our own relationships now? The Jesus story culminates in our clemency, so can't we offer forgiveness to those who have offended us …

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever," says the Bible. But we do know a few things to help us sort through this issue.

First, we know from Scripture that everyone has a moral standard written on their heart by God and that everyone is guilty of violating that standard (Romans 2:15). That's why our conscience bothers us when we do something wrong. Second, we know that everyone has enough information from observing the created world to know that God exists, yet people have suppressed that truth and rejected God anyway (Romans 1:20).

But both the Old and New Testaments tell us that those who wholeheartedly seek God will find him (Jeremiah 29:13). In fact, the Bible says that the Holy Spirit is seeking us first, making it possible for us to seek him (Hebrews 11:6). This suggests to me that people who respond to the understanding that they have and who earnestly seek after the one true God will find an opportunity, in some way, to receive the eternal life that God graciously provides through Jesus …

We can be confident that whenever people—of any race, in any culture, at any time—cry out to God, he will respond, often in stunning and unexpected ways.

After all, we see in Scripture that God is scrupulously fair. The very first book of the Bible asks, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25) Observed one author, "When God is finished dealing with all of us, none will be able to complain that they were treated unfairly." In other words, when history is consummated, we will each personally marvel at how absolutely perfect God's judgment is. Finally, we know that apart from the payment that Jesus made on the cross, nobody has a chance of getting off death row. Exactly how much knowledge a person has to have about Jesus, or precisely where the lines of faith are drawn, only God knows. He and he alone can expose the motives of a person's heart. (1 Corinthians 4:5)

In the end, all we really needed to know about the matter is this: God is good, God is loving, and God is fair. When we're confident of those foundational truths, we can thoroughly trust him for the outcome.

10 | What to Do?

As a minister, I have been called upon to preach a funeral from time to time – an exercise that wakes me up quickly. In preparation, God gathers together hidden truths in my mind and heart – things that are of eternal importance. Here's one such eulogy.

Aunt Joyce

Aunt Joyce – two of my favorite words.

She was married to one of my all-time favorite people Uncle Raymond.

When he died, it was a devastating blow to me. I can still see the position of my hand placing a letter into a slot at my job at the Post Office as Jack Swing walked up to give me the news. It was at that moment that my heart went out to Aunt Joyce and I silently grieved with her over his sudden and unexpected death.

The great consolation to me in her passing is that Uncle Raymond is undoubtedly this very moment showing her the city, the heavenly Jerusalem, where God Himself is the light, where love is the currency, where all hope and passion is fulfilled in the person of our Lord Jesus! Raymond has probably taken her out to the most dazzling restaurant in town, making up for lost time by showing her the best of the best!

I can hear her laugh even now. It's an infectious laugh that makes you want to join in even if you haven't understood what's so funny.

Joyce Carey was a lady and a dame all rolled into one. And there was just nothing better than when she and mom and Aunt Florence would get together and start telling stories. It more than made up for the fact that her TV only had one channel and that Lawrence Welk seemed to be on it continuously!

I never saw her be anything but polite and kind. I only saw her good side, and if she had a bad side I don't want to hear about it. And because she fully embraced Jesus as her King and Savior, He fully forgave and paid for any and all of her faults and failures, and my perfect Aunt Joyce stands before the throne of God more perfect than ever – a bride made spotless by the sacrificial love of the Lamb of God poured out upon her through Jesus' death and resurrection.

It's kind of humorous to realize that you've only seen the good side of someone. As I pondered that thought while preparing this message, the Lord allowed me to see that I had been given the privilege of seeing Joyce as He saw her. From the first moment that she gave her heart and life to Jesus, God the Father, too, only saw the beautiful, lady-dame Joyce that I saw.

How do I know that Aunt Joyce is in heaven and that my thoughts are not simply the wishful thinking of a grieving nephew? I know because the Scriptures proclaim it: Whosoever calls upon of the name of the Lord shall be saved; Jesus has all power and authority to keep in His care all those who have bound themselves to Him by faith, and no one can removed us from His hand.

In John 17, He told His Father in heaven, none has been lost of those You gave Me,

except Judas – "the son of perdition."

When I visited Joyce several months ago, she seemed to be so proud to be taking me to her church service, and not a little upset that her pastor wasn't preaching that day! In an unexpected turning of the tables, she seemed to be assuring me that she knew God, and loved and worshipped the Lord of glory. And I heard her loud and clear. And so I cannot grieve for Aunt Joyce as people might who have no relationship with God or assurance of heaven.

If she could have talked that day, she'd have said something like what Job said in the midst of his trials (Job 19:25-27):

> *I know that my Redeemer lives, and in the end He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!*

As I looked at her, bound to that wheelchair, unable to communicate, with every reason to be angry, and bitter, and to turn against God, she remained steadfast and resolute in her faith in Him, defiant against the winds of hell – again, like Job, who cried, "Though He slay me, yet will I hope in Him!" (Job 13:15)

That was Joyce Holland Carey!

She was a heroine. She was in a body that could not move and she could not communicate. Imagine it. These are the kind of circumstances that forge good souls into great ones, through a process we cannot fathom.

This is the mystery of suffering. Paul tells us in Romans 8:17 that sharing in the sufferings of Christ is a sign that we are both God's children and heirs of God, and that when the suffering ends, our reward will be to co-inherit the glory that has been given to Jesus in exchange for His sufferings for us. No more tears, no more crying, no more pain.

Jesus Christ Himself is now physically present with her. Oh yeah! And over there is King David, and the guy over there chewing on locusts and talking with Mother Teresa – that's John the Baptist. Can you imagine? And the awesome thing is – they really are there, right now. Adam and Eve, Noah, Moses, Uncle Raymond and Aunt Joyce.

And there are angels everywhere, no doubt whizzing by at warp speed. There are lots of them. In the scene in Revelation 5:11, it says that *just in the throne room of God alone,* there are well over 100 million angels. This is big folks! It's the moment when everything comes down to the wire – a moment we will all face.

Imagine the experience Joyce is having right now, after so many years of infirmity and pain! Surely by now she's leaned over to the Apostle Paul and complimented him on the things he said about suffering in Romans 8 – revelations that she now recognizes as being true of her own sufferings, as difficult as they were – knowing without a doubt that they were not worth comparing with the glory that is now being revealed to her. Especially when just one look from the Prince of Peace seated next to her – is worth everything.

One of my favorite Scripture scholars, Dr J.I. Packer, wrote this in his book *Knowing God:*

When people [come to] know God, [and in Joyce's case, the knowing is now face to face], losses and crosses cease to matter to them; what they have gained simply banishes these things from their minds.

The suffering is over for Aunt Joyce. And if my guess is correct, right after dessert in that most dazzling of heavenly restaurants, Aunt Joyce with Uncle Raymond will be stepping out in her new traveling shoes. They're going to race "Mom-Mom" to the nearest star and back while PK (my deceased father) holds the stopwatch.

There's nobody out there in that cemetery. That's only the place we go to remember those who have gone on to their eternal reward. Aunt Joyce has joined them – more alive than she's ever been! She's rejoicing with the great assembly of those Lovers of God who have gone before and now see Him face to face. We will join them too some day if we also seek to know and love God and surrender ourselves to His loving plans for us. For He alone is worthy. And as the Scriptures promise, we will dwell in the "house of the Lord" – with Aunt Joyce and Uncle Raymond – forever!

King David said as much in Psalm 23:

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want; He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Let's join with the Apostle Paul and begin living as if we really mean it – as if we really believe what he wrote in 2 Timothy 4:6-8, Colossians 3:1-4 and Hebrews 12:1-2, as his death approached:

The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Let me close with a story.

One day a beggar saw a magi and his entourage approaching from a distance. He was quite poor, owning only the bowl of rice in his hands. As the magi drew near, the beggar cried out,

"Oh Magi, if you would please share with me out of the bounty that God has placed into your hands, I might live another day."

The magi stepped down from his carriage and said to the beggar, "I am so very hungry today. Would you give me your bowl of rice?"

The beggar was astonished and a bit peeved that such a rich man would be asking him for anything when he was the one in need. But he ran his fingers through the rice in his bowl and finally brought two grains to give to the magi. The magi thanked him, mounted his carriage and rode off down the road.

By then, the beggar was fuming. As he ran his fingers through the rice once again, he suddenly noticed a piece of gold the size and shape of a grain of rice. He frantically scrounged around some more and found a second grain of gold, but no more.

Looking up as the magi began to fade from sight in the distance, he cried, "Magi - if I had only known, I would have given you the entire bowl!"

Let's give the entire bowl, to the One who loves us so much that He gave His one and only Son as a sacrifice for your sins and mine – "that whosoever would believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life." To this end, Jesus added, "This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent".

Some of the Most Important Bible Verses

Examine yourself to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves – that Jesus Christ is in you, unless indeed you fail the test? But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test.(2 Corinthians 13:5-6)

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:20-21)

Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (Matthew 5:23-24)

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another,

and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. (Colossians 3:12-14)

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, outcry and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and tenderhearted to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:31-32)

Love must be sincere. Detest what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Outdo yourselves in honoring one another. (Romans 12:9-10)

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (Matthew 6:12)

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. (Luke 6:37)

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into His image with intensifying glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:17-18)

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

What Happens When You Die?

Jesus has come on a rescue mission. He does not send anyone to hell. People go there because they have refused or neglected to believe Jesus is the Son of God and the only one who can restore them to God. The offer of rescue is real and for everyone who wants to be cleansed from their sin through Jesus Christ. Everyone! It's that simple!

Don't take your cue from those who pretend to be followers of Christ but do not live the life He taught us to live. They cannot help you.

And don't neglect His offer of salvation (Hebrews 2:1-4) just because you think you can't live the life Christ calls you to live. No one can! But He has sent the Holy Spirit to indwell us and enable us to live that life. He gives us not only salvation, but the power to walk alongside Him as well. And when we fall short – as we will–His sacrifice continues to cover us if we have sincerely turned our backs on that sin (1 John 1:9). And as we continue to follow Him, that sin will become increasingly less attractive to us over time.

Jesus said in Luke 6:43-49:

> *There is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. "For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.*
>
> *Why do you call Me, "Lord, Lord," and do not do what I say? Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock; and when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great.*

Do you want heaven rather than hell? Are you fed up with the evil in this world? Since Adam and Eve fell away from God and passed that fatal disposition on to everyone since, forgiveness of sins is the only way back to God. No one can live in God's presence without accepting the cleansing that became ours when Jesus died in our place. He is the only one who can reconcile us to God. As He clearly warned, "You must believe I am the one I claim to be or you will die in your sins!" (John 8:24)

This is what the Apostle Peter was meaning in Acts 2:21 when he told the crowds: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved!"

And again, in Acts 4:12: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved!”

Jesus is the *only* way to heaven. He alone paid the penalty for our sins. As The Imperials sang in their song “Oh Buddha”:

Well, old Buddha was a man
And I’m sure that he meant well
But I pray for his disciples
Lest they wind up in hell
And I’m sure that old Mohammed
Thought he knew the way
But it won’t be Hare Krishna
We stand before on Judgment Day

(Refrain) No, it won’t be old Buddha
That’s sitting on the throne
And it won’t be old Mohammed
That’s calling us home
And it won’t be Hare Krishna
That plays that trumpet tune
And we’re going to see the Son
Not Reverend Moon

Well, I don’t hate anybody
So please don’t take me wrong
But there really is a message
In this simple song
You see, there’s only one way, Jesus
If eternal life is your goal
And meditation of the mind
It won’t save your soul

Refrain

Well, you can call yourself a Baptist
And not be born again
A Presbyterian or a Methodist
And still die in your sin
You can even be Charismatic
Shout and dance and jump a pew
But if you hate your brother
You won’t be one of the chosen few

‘Cause it won’t be a Baptist
That’s sitting on the throne

A Presbyterian or a Methodist
That's calling us home
And it won't be a Charismatic
That plays that trumpet tune
So let's all just live for Jesus
Because He's coming back real soon

Refrain

After you have decided to receive Jesus' offer of salvation and walk with Him, what does the Bible say about the resurrection of the dead when He returns?

The Bible has a lot to say about it in 1 Corinthians 15.

I quote much of the chapter below.

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all He appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

The Resurrection of the Dead

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that He raised Christ from the dead. But He did not raise Him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have

fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to Him. Then the end will come, when He hands over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For He "has put everything under His feet." Now when it says that "everything" has been put under Him, it is clear that this does not include God Himself, who put everything under Christ. When He has done this, then the Son Himself will be made subject to Him who put everything under Him, so that God may be all in all.

The Resurrection Body

... But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as He has determined, and to each kind of seed He gives its own body. Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam (Jesus), a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.

I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

(1 Corinthians 15:1-28; 35-58)

Appendix 2

Facing Death With Confidence

A Meditation on 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 (Author Unknown)

In "Ripley's Believe it or Not Museum" in Gatlinburg, TN, Near Uniontown, PA a gravestone reads, "Here lies the body of Jonathan Blake. He stepped on the gas instead of the brake."

Boot-Hill cemetery in Tombstone, AZ has an epitaph that reads, "Here lies Lester Moore, 4 slugs from a 44, no less, no more."

There's a minister's tombstone that reads, "Gone to another meeting."

A gravestone in Maryland reads, "Here lies an atheist, all dressed up and no place to go."

One I really liked is from a small town in Alabama, which reads, "Here lies Solomon Peas. Peas is not here, only the pod. Peas shelled out and went home to God."

We smile at those tombstones but death is a very serious matter. Many people have a great fear of death. Some people refuse to have the funeral of a loved one in the church, because they fear being reminded of death when they come to worship.

Hebrews 2:15 describes the human family as people, "who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death." Fear of death grips many people."

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul discusses death from God's perspective. The Bible calls death the last enemy to be defeated. And in this passage Paul talks about how death will be defeated, and what happens when we die. What a day that will be. What a celebration!

I want us to see three principles that I think will help us be more confident in death.

First, we need to be realistic about our present existence

Our present existence is increasingly difficult. By that I mean that the longer a Christian lives in this present world, the less attraction this world holds.

Twice in this passage Paul compares our life in this world to a tent. Verse 1, "If the earthly tent we live in is destroyed."

Now I think there are two words that describe living in a tent. One is the word insecure. A tent is not a very good fortress, and the canvas does not provide much comfort from wild animals, or a raging storm.

Paul was a tent maker and he compared this life to a tent; it is not very secure and it can be destroyed.

This life is so uncertain. We try to develop security through insurance, accumulation of material things, but no matter how much we have in this world it is still so insecure. We teach our children to pray, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake ..." We're that vulnerable.

The second thing about a tent is that it is uncomfortable. And it gets increasingly uncomfortable the longer you're in it.

About five years ago, I went camping with 30 young people. We camped by a stream in a beautiful area of the Nantahala National Forest in the Smokey Mountains of North Carolina. On the first night we were sitting around the campfire singing songs and sharing our faith when one of the kids said enthusiastically, "This is so cool. I wish we could stay longer than a week." "Don't worry," the camp director said, "you'll be ready to go home by Friday." And he was right. By Friday all I could think about was my king-size bed, a clean shower, and air conditioning.

Physically speaking the longer you're in this world the more difficult it is. Paul says in verse 4, "While we are still alive in this tent, we groan" – and that's the truth.

Sometimes, there's an inner moaning that accompanies sickness, or the death of a loved one, or disappointment in people.

Normally our last years, if we live to an old age, are filled with more sorrow and more trouble, and life is increasingly uncomfortable. The longer you live in this world the less attraction it has for you. That's why Revelation 14:13 says, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, they will rest from their labors."

Second, we need to be informed and understand what happens when we die

Information is almost always an antidote for fear. When you're going to have major heart surgery it's reassuring and helpful when the doctor uses diagrams, and shows you exactly what is going to take place. And it's helpful to read God's Word and to understand what is going to happen when we die.

The Bible describes a sequence of events that happen when you die.

First, there is the departure of the Spirit, from the body. Paul calls it being away from the body. In 2 Timothy 4:6 Paul says, "The time of my departure has come." This tent we live in houses a spirit, and while the tent is destroyed, the spirit continues to live on. One day my body is going to be destroyed, and my spirit is going to depart. Jesus said, "Don't be afraid of those who kill the body, they cannot kill the soul."

After the spirit leaves the body it is immediately present with God. In 2 Corinthians 5:8 Paul says, "To be absent from the body is to be home with the Lord." Notice there are only two stages: You are either in the body and away from the Lord or out of the body and with the Lord. There is no intermediate stage of purging; the sacrifice of Jesus in itself was complete and eternal – for all men, for all time.

When Jesus died He prayed, "Father, into Your hands I commend My Spirit." In Luke 16 when Lazarus died, he was immediately comforted in "Abraham's bosom." But when the rich man died, immediately he was in a tormented state.

I heard about a guy who died. His wife was at his bedside, and wrote down his last words, "I see it. It's beautiful! Do you see it?"

I told that story to a group one time and a woman came up to me afterwards and said, ''Let me tell you what my uncle said just before he died. He was not a Christian. He got a horrible look on his face and said, I see a fiery pit."

Please understand that the promises we're talking about are promises for people who know Jesus. That's why in the 23rd Psalm, David could say, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me."

So there is departure from the body, there is immediate presence with the Lord, and there will eventually be a new glorified body. Look at 2 Corinthians 5:3: "We will not be found naked." Now what does that mean?" I think it means that we are not going to spend eternity as disembodied spirits floating around in heaven. God is not going to leave us unclothed. God is going to clothe us with a new "glorified" body.

The Bible doesn't tell us anything about the nature of our heavenly bodies during the period between our translation to heaven at death and the resurrection of our earthly bodies at the Second Coming of Christ. Those who have written about visiting heaven during a near-death experience consistently report that believers in heaven are not ghost-like but have a certain solidity to them. If true, then there still must be a difference between the solidity of the body in heaven and the solidity of the resurrected body at the Second Coming. Otherwise, a resurrection of earthly bodies would be unnecessary. However, the Bible doesn't reveal what that difference might be.

When you die, you immediately go to be with God. You are alert, you will be joyful, but eternal existence is not complete until the resurrection of our bodies.

1 Thessalonians 4: from v13 says,

> *We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus; God will bring with Him those who have died.*

Keep that in mind – Jesus is going to bring "with Him" those who have died. The spirits of the believing dead are going to come with Jesus when He returns.

Then Paul continues,

> *For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord Himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of the trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.*

Now Jesus is going to bring with Him the spirits, and the dead in Christ are going to rise. The dead bodies are going to be resurrected, and there is going to be a new glorified body, that will be reunited with the spirit.

That's why the return of Jesus Christ, and the rapture when we are lifted up to meet the Lord, is so exciting, because we begin our new perfection in Christ.

The rest of the passage says,

> *Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore, encourage one another with these words.*

We worry today about whether it's a sealed casket, whether it's watertight. I want one with a pop-top lid! I want to come out of there just as fast as I can.

If God could create Adam out of the dust of the ground, God won't have any trouble at the resurrection, creating new glorified bodies for us.

The Bible says,

> *In a moment, in a twinkling of the eye we will be changed ... and then comes the judgment (Hebrews 9:27, 1 Corinthians 15:52).*

2 Corinthians 5:10 says,

> *All of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.*

The judgment for the non-Christian will be a judgment of the way we have mis-lived our lives. For the contemptuously unrepentant it will be terrifying. But the judgment of the Christian will be to determine reward. As Christ's followers our shortfalls, misdeeds and moral failures will have been washed away and forgiven by God; we won't be accountable for those. But there will be a greater reward for martyrs like Paul than there will be for lightweights like us.

1 Corinthians 3, 13, says our work will be shown for what it is. Paul says,

> *The work of each builder will become visible for the Day (judgment day) will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.*

My judgment as a Christian will not be for my sin, but for the giving of rewards. For example, was my preaching the best I could do? Were my motives genuine? Was I faithful to the Gospel? How good a leader was I? Did I have a passion to promote the peace, purity, and unity of the church?

In Ephesians 5, Paul says,

> *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*

God will determine how good a husband I was. How did I love my wife? Did I make her well-being of primary importance? Did I sacrifice everything for her?

If I wasn't faithful in ministry, or loving toward my wife, then I'll lose the reward; though Paul says, "I will be saved, but only as through fire."

That's why 2 Corinthians 5:9 says, "We make it our aim to please the Lord."

So there's departure from the body, and immediate presence with the Lord, then the return of Christ in which the body will be resurrected, then God's evaluation of our lives and perfect existence in eternity.

In John 14 Jesus said,

In My Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to Myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

Third, eagerly anticipate eternal life!

Paul anticipates heaven. In 2 Corinthians 5:2, Paul "groans, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling." In verse 4, "We wish to be clothed." In verse 8, "We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." And so, the older we grow in the Christian life the more eagerly we ought to anticipate heaven.

I think scripturally there are two words to describe heaven that make me long to be there. The first is the word *perfection.* There will be no sin there to wound and to scar. The Book of Revelation says, "God is going to wipe away all tears from our eyes, there will be no pain, or sorrow, or mourning, or death, for former things will pass away."

Billy Graham says when his grandmother died, she sat straight up in bed and said, "I see Jesus! His hand is outstretched to me. And there's Ben, and he has two legs and two eyes!" Billy says that his grandfather Ben had lost an eye and a leg at Gettysburg sometime before he died.

The second is the word *people*. Heaven is also going to be a place of *people*. There will be no alienation. It will be a place of reunion. The Bible says we're going to sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. People will come from East and West and North and South. There are going to be so many people, we won't be able to count them.

When I'm at the airport I like to stand and watch people get off the plane and be reunited with family they haven't seen for a long time. They just hug and embrace. Can you imagine standing and watching people the first day in heaven? There are some of you I would like to watch when you embrace children, grandparents, parents, family members you haven't seen for a long time. What a day that will be! What a celebration!

Years ago when I lived in Louisville, Kentucky I went to hear Derrick Johnson and his singing group perform. Before their finale he told a story that I'll never forget. He said that he was taking care of his four-year old granddaughter and they went to the supermarket. He ran into one of his neighbors and started talking and when he looked around his little granddaughter was nowhere in sight. He found her only one aisle over but she was scared to death. For a long time after that she was terrified of crowds. A few weeks later she was spending the night and they sat down in the family room to spend time with God together before going to bed.

The little girl said, "Granddaddy will there be a lot of people in heaven?" He said, "O yeah, there'll be a lot of people in heaven. So many that we can't even count them," the Bible says.

She said, "How will I ever find you and grandma when I get to heaven?" He said that he knew that was a childish question but he wanted to give her a good answer so he said, "When you get to heaven you just wait for us right inside the gate and we'll all meet as a family."

She said, “Granddaddy is there more than one gate in heaven?” He remembered that the Book of Revelation says that there are four walls and each has three gates. He said, “There are 12 gates.”

So she said, “Well which gate?” He said, “I’ll tell you what. When you get to heaven you ask somebody which way is East and you just walk and walk until you come to the Eastern wall and then you find the middle gate on the eastern wall and let’s all meet as a family just inside the middle Eastern gate.”

That seemed to satisfy her so he kissed her good night and he said, “Now remember we’re going to meet just inside …” and she interrupted and said, “… the middle Eastern gate.

Derrick Johnson said that from that time forward he and his granddaughter hardly ever said goodbye to each other without one saying, “Meet you just inside …”

And the other would say, “… the middle Eastern gate.” He turned toward the stage and asked a girl in the singing group if that was a true story? She winked and said, “Yes it is.”

He said, “How do you know?”

She said, “I was that little girl.”

Well, we all burst into applause. We had no idea that was his granddaughter.

When the applause died down he looked at her and said, “Meet you just inside…” She said, “… The middle eastern gate.”

I didn’t hear much of the next song because I was thinking where I was going to meet my family, someday... just inside the gate, just inside the gate.

Paul says, “We know... by faith that to be absent from this body is to be present with the Lord” ... forever!

What a celebration that will be! Don’t miss it for the world!

Appendix 3

Thrilling Bible Passages about our Eternal Future with God

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will You let Your faithful one see decay. (Psalm 16:9–10)

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me … Surely Your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Psalm 23:4, 6)

Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. (Psalm 84:10)

The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by distress and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD: "LORD, save me!" (Psalm 116:3–4)

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. (Isaiah 11:6)

See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. (Isaiah 65:17)

For He is the living God and He endures forever; His kingdom will not be destroyed, His dominion will never end. He rescues and He saves; He performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. (Daniel 6:26–27)

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19–21)

His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Matthew 25:21)

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." Jesus

answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise". (Luke 23:42–43)

My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going. (John 14:2–4)

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18)

However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived—the things God has prepared for those who love Him". (1 Corinthians 2:9)

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:42–44)

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:54–57)

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. (2 Corinthians 5:1)

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him. (1 Thessalonians 4:13–14)

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing.(2 Timothy 4:7–8)

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. (1 John 5:11)

The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the Book of Life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and His angels. (Revelation 3:5)

Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7:16–17)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then He said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true". (Revelation 21:1–5)

And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it; and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. (Revelation 21:23-27)

They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:4-5)

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